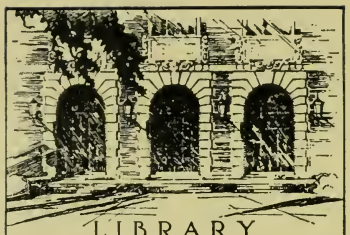

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THE MAN OF MARK.

THE

MAN OF MARK.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"RICHARD LANGDON."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.
1866.

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LONDON:
SAVILL AND EDWARDS, PRINTERS, CHANDOS STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.

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THE MAN OF MARK.

CHAPTER I.

It was the morning after the ball at the embassy, and Aubrey sat in his private writing-room before a blazing fire. He reclined at his ease in a luxurious arm-chair, and leaned back against the cushions in a musing attitude. His head throbbed a good deal, and his eye was dull and lustreless, for he drank deep the previous evening, and had rather a confused recollection of what he had said to Ida. Towards the end of the ball they adjourned to an anteroom, where, seated on the sofa, they talked long together, and Aubrey could only remember that his words had grown somewhat impas-

sioned, and that he certainly kissed her hand. He knew that when his feelings were excited in any unusual degree he made the wildest protestations of whatever was the passion of the moment, and wondered to what lengths he had gone with Ida.

The apartment which he occupied was fitted up as a library, and was large and lofty, with carved oak ceiling, and massive shelves fitted into the walls. A goodly array of richly-bound books were ranged about, and there was a large writing-table which Aubrey used. He made the room a lounge, and no one entered it, except at rare intervals when Ida would come to look for some stray volume of poetry. This morning Aubrey particularly wished to be undisturbed, and had given the strictest orders that no visitor was to be admitted.

An open writing-desk lay upon the table, and Aubrey had been turning over its contents, for various letters and packets were scattered about. Reaching languidly across,

he took up an envelope which was fastened round with a little silk thread, and opening it drew out two photographs. A lock of fair hair was twined about one of the photographs, which represented a young girl scarcely twenty years of age. She was very simply dressed, and the face was one of innocent girlish beauty, untutored in the wiles of fashion and art. There was an indescribable sweetness in the features, however, which bespoke a refinement of nature perfectly in keeping with the maiden's whole aspect, although her fingers were not loaded with rings nor her ears decked with gemmed drops.

Aubrey gazed long and intently upon the picture, and his eye seemed to recover its lustre as he contemplated the serenely sweet countenance. He took the lock of hair and gently twined it round his finger, examining its glossy silky threads that coiled lovingly about his hand. Then on a sudden the expression of his features changed into an

almost sardonic smile as he dwelt over this memento of other days.

"And has it come to this," he murmured; "never to bestow a thought upon this girl who has given up her whole life and soul to her love! What a villain's part is this, to steal her gentle heart away and leave the poor stricken deer to weep in silence. It was deliberately done, and no palliating circumstances can be pleaded as an excuse for conduct so base. Grant that there was no wish to lead her on to inevitable ruin, and no cunningly devised, elaborate scheme to take advantage of the sweet trustfulness of her heart, still the fatal train has been laid, and who can tell what may be the consequences. In truth, the murder of that girl's peace of mind is as great a crime as that committed by the assassin who plunges his dagger into his unresisting victim's breast. Yet of what avail is this? I pursue my way with indifference, plunging into the vortex of pleasure, offering the

same vows of adoration at some other shrine, as though they were the untutored utterances of a virgin heart, while the girl who adores me—who inhales the breath of life almost from my lips—is treacherously beguiled and deceived. Can I console myself by saying other men have done the same thing fifty times—have even completed their vile work, and defaced the pure idol of their affections, and yet bask in the smiles of lovely women, who take no heed of such fashionable failings? No, I cannot, for a faint remnant of the chivalry of my innocent youth still lingers in my bosom, and tells me to make atonement for such double-dyed perfidy. Far better would it have been for me to have remained in that sweet retirement for ever than to return to my life of splendid misery."

He ceased, and once more his head fell back on the cushions, while his eyes remained closed. In truth, he felt very heavy and drowsy, for the fitful snatches of sleep

he had during the night left him unrefreshed and exhausted. The heat of the blazing fire, and the artificial warmth of the apartment, contributed to lull him into slumber. In a few minutes he was fast asleep, and the photograph slipped through his fingers, and fell upon the floor. The lock of fair hair still remained twining round his hand.

At this moment the door of the apartment was gently opened, and Ida entered; she had come to look for a book she remembered was on the shelves, and did not know that Aubrey was within. Seeing him asleep in the arm-chair, she stole quietly up till she was quite close, and stopping, gazed fondly upon his face. Although he might have forgotten what impassioned words he poured into her ear the previous night, Ida treasured up each loving expression. There he was before her, unconscious of who watched him with such intense interest; although perchance his dreams might be of

Ida. Her woman's breast yearned towards him; she longed to cast herself upon him, and confess her burning love; slowly, but surely, it had grown into an almighty and consuming passion, and, let the consequences be what they might, she could conceal it no longer.

All at once Ida caught sight of the likeness at his feet, and instantly stooping down, she picked it up. Oh, what an envenomed pang shot through her bosom as she gazed on the placid features of the girl she instinctively felt to be her rival! She felt sick and dizzy, and leaned against the table for support, forgetting that De Vaux might be awakened by her motions. Who was this strange woman, whose image must be enshrined in his heart, and what right had she to have gained this place? It was no high-born beauty who had usurped the coveted niche, for then the pang would not have been so keen; if she must have a rival, at any rate let it be one of noble and

commanding presence and splendid worldly position, not a mere cottage maiden, of simple birth, as the likeness before her would indicate. But a worse sting was felt by Ida when, glancing at Aubrey's hand, she saw the lock of golden hair fondly twined round his fingers. Her agony was now complete; here was double proof that he loved another, for instantly she connected the lock of hair with the likeness. At the very time when she believed that his feelings were ripening towards her, the whole fond illusion was ruthlessly dissipated. A deadly sensation of hatred for the unknown girl, who was the unconscious instrument of such a wound being inflicted, possessed Ida's breast. Could she only find out where her detested rival was, in order to brand her with some mark of her fury and indignation!

Ida hastily noted on a slip of paper the name of the artist who executed the photograph, and replaced it on the floor. A new

impulse had been given to the current of her feelings towards Aubrey; and jealousy, with its maddening train of sorrows, swelled in her breast. Yet if she only paused to reflect, she would see how unreasonable was all this emotion. De Vaux never professed any love for her—on the contrary, they had seen little of one another for months past, and only during the last day or two had he resumed his former warmth of manner, although to no extent sufficient to warrant a renewal of hope on her part. Last night, certainly, when under the influence of unusual excitement, his impassioned words might be calculated to awaken delusive hopes, but she ought to be well aware that it was a mere transient and hollow ebullition of sentiment.

Grief and rage alike consumed within poor Ida's breast; and now she felt keenly having no true friend in whom to confide her sorrow. It was no use speaking to her father, for he had already warned her against

entertaining any thoughts of gaining De Vaux's love. The secret must be locked up in her own bosom, and with a serene face she must continue daily to meet the man who inflicted so deadly a wound upon her peace of mind. Casting an angry, and yet a wistful look, upon the unconscious picture which had caused all this trouble, Ida slowly left the apartment.

CHAPTER II.

Next day the Baron asked Ida to accompany him on a visit to the English Ambassador; and accordingly, in the afternoon, one of Aubrey's well-appointed sledges was in waiting to convey them. The day was bright and clear, and the reflection of the sparkling snow almost dazzled Ida's eyes as they sped rapidly over the frozen surface of the streets. They drove along the noble quays which line the banks of the Neva; and she was struck with the magnificence of the Winter Palace, the palace of marble, the Isaac Cathedral, and other fine buildings, which were seen to great advantage in the pure cold atmosphere. On arriving at the embassy they were ushered into one

of the reception-rooms, while the servant went to announce their names. While they were waiting for the noble mistress of the house, Ida amused herself by looking through some *carte-de-visite* books, which lay on the table. She was listlessly turning over the leaves of one when, to her amazement, there was presented to her view a copy of the very likeness which lay at Aubrey's feet, when she found him asleep in his library the previous day. Ida could scarcely believe her eyes, and closely examined the photograph, in case she was mistaken in the identity of the two pictures; but there was no doubt they were the same, for every feature of the face which caused her so much pain was vividly impressed on her mind, and there could be no dispute as to her recollection being correct; still it seemed so utterly inexplicable how a copy should be in the volume now before her, that she began to think it must be merely a remarkable similarity of feature in the two.

To make certain, she slipped the portrait out of its place, and, on inspecting the back, there was the artist's name and address which she noted down from the *carte* that dropped out of Aubrey's hand. More astonished than ever, she carefully replaced the photograph, and once more examined the face. No, there was no mistaking the sweet, placid expression of countenance, the simple morning dress, and the modest attitude of the figure. Could it be some fancy portrait, photographed for sale, as so many favourite painters' works now are? Would that this supposition should prove true; but why should Aubrey treasure up a mere trifle of this sort, and take it out in the solitude of his room for some secret purpose? Then the lock of hair in his hand, which she instinctively connected with the portrait—how was it to be got rid of? Altogether, there was some mystery attached to this likeness, which, now that her jealous curiosity was

thoroughly awakened, she determined to solve.

However, it was necessary to suspend her surmises for the present, as Lady W—— entered the room, and their acquaintance was so slight, that Ida could not venture to question her on the subject. Indeed, it is always a delicate matter to inquire who are the originals of the *cartes-de-visite* that fill the volumes scattered over the drawing-room tables of one's friends.

"I hope, Lady W——, you have quite recovered from the fatigues of your charming ball," said the Baron, after the customary salutations had been exchanged.

"Thank you, I have. A slight headache, brought on by the heat of the rooms, was the only trace of it I felt next morning. I need not inquire how your daughter is, judging by her looks."

"I never enjoyed a ball more," said Ida. "What delightful rooms you have, and the whole arrangements were admirable."

"I have not seen Mr. De Vaux since," said Lady W——; "he seemed to be flirting with our last new beauty, the Countess Z——; she is witty and amusing."

This was another pang for Ida, who had, indeed, noticed the attentions Aubrey paid the fascinating countess.

A few more commonplace remarks passed, and the Baron and Ida were about to take their leave, when a new visitor was announced in the person of the Honourable Eustace De Burgh, one of the *attachés*. The new caller was introduced to Ida and her father, and Lady W—— engaged the Baron in conversation, while Mr. De Burgh was left to entertain his daughter.

The *attaché* was a young man of easy, gentlemanly appearance, with regular features, expressive eyes, and carefully-trimmed beard and moustache. There was a singularity in his manner which struck Ida—who was a keen observer of such matters—a quick, restless expression in the eyes; and

she particularly noticed that although their conversation was animated, he never once smiled. He expressed his ideas clearly and well; and there was altogether something in his whole style which greatly interested Ida.

"Who is this wonderful Mr. De Vaux, that everybody is talking about?" said Mr. De Burgh, after they had touched upon various topics.

"Have you not met him?" replied Ida; "well, you will make his acquaintance next week at the ball he is to give."

"He has been good enough to favour me with an invitation, and I am quite curious to see him. They say he is immensely rich, and his extravagance great in proportion; besides which, he is most eccentric in his behaviour."

"Most of what you hear is mere gossip; but you can judge for yourself. He is very clever, and perhaps a little affected, but

being an Englishman, all his peculiarities are exaggerated unmercifully."

"The usual way with our charitable fellow-creatures," replied Mr. De Burgh; "they take the most absurd notions into their heads, and are quite disappointed if any one they have made up their minds must be a peculiar being turns out to be an ordinary individual."

"Have you been long in St. Petersburgh?" asked Ida, after a pause.

"Not above a month; but I suppose I shall be a fixture here for the next three years at least."

"And how do you like the prospect?"

"I can hardly say positively, as yet, how I shall get on with the people here, although what I have seen of them I am favourably impressed with," answered Mr. De Burgh.

"To us it is a pleasant variety, especially to Mr. De Vaux, who was quite tired of the monotony of London seasons and English fashionable country-house life. Not that I

particularly wished to come to Russia; but, now I am here, I mean to enjoy myself," said Ida.

"I think you have every prospect of this intention being gratified, for, I believe, we are to have an unusually gay season. This ball of Mr. De Vaux's—about which, by the way, I hear wonderful stories as regards splendour and cost—will put everybody on their mettle."

"Who are considered the belles of St. Petersburgh?" asked Ida, with an appearance of interest—"I presume the Countess Z—— is one?"

"Yes, I believe she is; and they say she says amusing things. Let me see!—I think I can show you one or two whose portraits I happen to possess," said Mr. De Burgh, taking up one of the albums which Ida had been inspecting. Her heart beat faster as she perceived it was the very one which contained the portrait that had so disturbed her equanimity, and she now had

an opportunity of finding out something about the mysterious stranger.

Mr. De Burgh turned over the leaves of the album rather rapidly, merely indicating who each of the *cartes-de-visite* represented, and presently came to the page in which was the likeness Ida was so interested in. He was passing it over entirely, when Ida said, with as much unconcern as she could assume—

"Who is that girl, so plainly dressed, and yet so interesting looking—some fancy portrait, I presume?"

At these words she fancied that De Burgh changed countenance, and fidgetted uneasily in his chair. It was clear there was some secret attached to this likeness—his whole manner betrayed it—and Ida's curiosity was now thoroughly awakened.

"Oh! that is a picture of a distant connexion of mine. I have not seen her for a long time. But look!—tell me what you think of this imperial beauty?" said

De Burgh, rapidly turning over the pages.

"I think she is extremely pretty," said Ida, finding that, for the present, it was better to pursue the subject no further.

"Shall we meet at the ball given by the Countess Z—— to-morrow night?" asked Mr. De Burgh, to change the subject of conversation.

"Yes; we are going."

"May I be allowed the honour of the first waltz with you, provided you are there when it commences?" said the gentleman.

"A somewhat necessary proviso," observed Ida, smiling; "I shall be very happy."

The Baron now rose to leave, and Ida accompanied him. When they were gone Mr. De Burgh asked Lady W—— who her visitors were, for he had been greatly interested in Ida.

"I declare you seem quite smitten with

that handsome foreigner!" said Lady W——, smiling.

"There was something very attractive in her appearance, I confess," replied Mr. De Burgh.

"And conversation too, I suspect, Mr. De Burgh. Why, I could not understand what had come over you, for you seem, in general, to shun all my young lady friends to whom I introduce you."

"Ah! that is only your fancy, Lady W——. In general, I believe I get credit for being extremely useful and dutiful."

* * * *

CHAPTER III.

The ball given by the young and beautiful Countess Z—— was attended by all the fashionable world of St. Petersburgh, who streamed through the wide salons and thronged the dancing-rooms. Mr. De Burgh was punctual in claiming fulfilment of Ida's promise to give him the first waltz, and they had, since that, danced several times together.

Her toilette was in exquisite taste, consisting of a blue satin dress covered with blue tulle flounces, with trimmings of silver foliage, and a magnificent diamond brooch, a present from Mr. De Vaux, glittered in her chemisette of point de Venise. Her head-dress was of gold and silver grapes,

with purple leaves, and in her hand she carried a superb bouquet, while she moved with an air of queenly grace, which drew glances of fervid admiration from the fashionable loungers who surveyed the dancers through their eye-glasses. This evening she had taken unusual pains to make herself look as beautiful as possible, for she observed Mr. De Burgh's evident admiration when they first were introduced, and had an object to gain in acquiring an influence over him. They strolled, with others of the dancers, into a conservatory full of fine exotics, with a marble statue of Venus at one end; a delightfully cool place after the heated atmosphere of the ball-room.

"And you say, Mr. De Burgh, that all this dazzling scene gives you no real pleasure?" said Ida, bending her eyes full upon those of her companion.

"I do, indeed; for, if you care not for those gay butterflies who exist only in the unhealthy air of the salons of the great, it

is impossible to find any enjoyment in mixing in their festivities."

"It is singular enough, but you and Mr. De Vaux have very similar tastes; and I always fancied that his ideas were quite peculiar to himself," said Ida, musingly.

"You have not yet pointed out this remarkable personage to me, Miss von Borgern; and as I am going to his ball, I should like to be introduced."

"I shall do so this evening," replied Ida; "that is to say, if we chance to meet him, for the crowd is so great that we may not have an opportunity. Besides, he often leaves very early, unless some special attraction induces him to remain, as he has had a good share of dissipation during half a dozen London seasons."

"What are your tastes?" said De Burgh, after a short pause; "do you like a life of excitement, or are you content to forsake the whirl of gaiety, and fall back upon the calm pleasures of home?"

"Home, indeed! Ah! Mr. De Burgh," replied Ida in a low tone, with a trace of sadness in her accents, "for years past I have known no home—that sweet word, which is the key to all the tranquil delights of a simple heart."

"Indeed, you surprise me!" said Mr. De Burgh; "I know that a certain intimate connexion subsists between your father and Mr. De Vaux, but I imagined that it was only a matter of long friendship, not extending to permanent residence together."

"We need not go into details just now; some other time I will tell you more. You are fortunate in having a mind and disposition free from care and sadness, able to adapt yourself to circumstances, and alive to each passing pleasure," said Ida.

Mr. De Burgh could not repress a sigh, and he almost bit his lips as if to conceal some inward emotion as he replied—

"Appearances may sometimes be very

deceitful. I assure you I have had my share of troubles."

"It is right that we all should know sorrow; who could live in a world that was all sunshine?"

"We shall make one another dreadfully gloomy," said Mr. De Burgh; "will you join the dancers?"

"No, I do not feel disposed to go back to the ball-room just now, but I must not detain you, Mr. De Burgh," replied Ida, with the faintest trace of pique in her tones.

"Nor I indeed, Miss von Borgern; I am your slave; command me and I will obey."

"You are fond of ladies' society, Mr. De Burgh," said Ida, abruptly; "am I not right?"

"I can truly say you are," answered the gentleman, wondering what this remark was *àpropos* of.

"I thought so from the number of hand-

some girls your album contained. Now what is your fancy; do you like dark beauties or fair?"

"Well, upon the whole I give preference to blonde before brunette. But I look beyond the mere outward features."

"Ah, that is what all you gentlemen say," interrupted Ida, "although I suspect it is very often a flash of the eye, or a smile from the ruby lips that seals your fate. But tell me, can you fancy a man who has been constantly surrounded with highly born, cultivated, and lovely women—a man of fastidious refinement of mind and manner—passing heedlessly by such sirens and fixing his affections upon some obscure possessor of a pretty face."

"Perfectly well; I am convinced it is possible," said De Burgh, almost with vehemence.

Ida looked at him with surprise, and a new and strange idea crossed her mind.

"There was one portrait in your book,

Mr. De Burgh, which interested me—that of a young girl very simply dressed, apparently with fair hair."

Here De Burgh moved uneasily, and his colour changed slightly, which Ida keenly noted.

"Really I have so many *cartes* I cannot tell which you mean. You like my collection, do you—I have another book that I must let you see. What a pleasant way it is of keeping one's friends always before one's notice," he said, with a degree of nervousness.

Ida was not to be baulked, however, and replied—

"Yes, but I have taken a fancy to know who that picture represents. You must remember it, because there is no other person the least approaching that style in the book."

"It may seem very stupid of me, but I really cannot recall the picture to mind; however, I shall look to-morrow and let you know. De Vaux is a re-

gular misanthrope and woman-hater, is he not?"

"I never heard it alleged that he was. It is curious how much you seem interested in him. One would almost imagine that your destinies in some manner were linked together."

These words were scarcely uttered ere Aubrey De Vaux's voice was heard exclaiming—

"Remember, Ida, you are engaged to me for the next Lancers."

Ida turned sharp round to answer him, but he had already left the room—indeed he scarcely entered it. A very remarkable change, however, had come over Mr. De Burgh, which she immediately noticed. His face turned deathly pale, his eyes looked wild and excited, and his appearance was that of a man suddenly taken ill.

"What is the matter with you, Mr. De Burgh?" said Ida, in some alarm; "you surely cannot be well?"

"It—it—is nothing," gasped out her companion, with painfully tremulous accents; "who—who—was that whose voice I heard just now?"

"Why that was Mr. De Vaux, to whom you are so anxious to be introduced," said Ida, wonderingly.

"Strange, strange what a resemblance!" muttered De Burgh, and then, recollecting himself, he said to Ida—"I have only recently recovered from a very long and dangerous illness, and sometimes I am seized with a violent pain and dizziness in my head, such as I had just now, and when it lasts I hardly know what I say."

"Very probably you have danced too much for one who has lately suffered from a fever. I hope you will feel no worse effects to-morrow," said Ida, not wishing to let De Burgh know that she noticed his agitation. Her curiosity was now thoroughly aroused with regard to her companion, for it was evident that there

was some mysterious connexion between him, De Vaux, and the unknown girl whose likeness they both possessed. But the difficulty was how to arrive at a knowledge of who she was, for De Burgh appeared resolved not to afford any clue, and she did not know how to introduce the subject to Aubrey; at any rate she would see the meeting between the latter and De Burgh, and possibly then something further might be elucidated.

"Shall we wait here for Mr. De Vaux, or would you prefer to rejoin your *chaperone*," asked De Burgh, who still showed traces of his recent excitement.

"I prefer to remain where I am, if I am not detaining you," answered Ida. "Perhaps it is better for you to keep out of the heated ball-room at present."

"Thank you, I am quite well now."

Mr. De Burgh was silent for a little, and then said, hesitatingly—

"I don't think you need introduce me

to Mr. De Vaux just now. There will be many other opportunities——"

His further remarks were cut short by the appearance of De Vaux himself, who came forward to lead Ida into the dancing room. When he was close to her, he then for the first time looked at De Burgh, who, in his turn, stared fixedly at the other. Seeing their eyes meet, and that both seemed confused, for Aubrey, too, gave a start of surprise when he stood before De Burgh face to face, Ida thought it best to introduce them at once.

"Mr. De Vaux, let me introduce Mr. De Burgh, who is coming to your ball."

Aubrey bent low, but did not utter a word, and then, drawing Ida's arm within his own, he turned away. De Burgh, on his part, did not speak, and, sinking back on the sofa, watched their retiring forms until they disappeared among the crowd. His face was more ghastly pale than ever,

and, leaning his throbbing brow on his hand, he seemed lost in thought.

"Who did you say that gentleman was, Ida?" said De Vaux, as they moved away. "De Burgh! De Burgh! I never knew any one of that name, and yet his face certainly was familiar to me."

"He is one of Lord W——'s *attachés*, and when we were calling yesterday at the embassy I was introduced. He also appeared to recognise your voice when you reminded me of our engagement for this dance; indeed it seemed to agitate him. Did you ever meet before?"

"Never that I am aware of, but he had a wonderful likeness to some one," said De Vaux, and his voice sunk, as though he were communing with himself.

"There is a mystery somewhere," said Ida, smiling; "both of you looked unutterable things at one another. Perhaps you were old schoolfellows, and once quarrelled about some boyish love! You know how

difficult it is to recognise one's companions after years of separation, and both have altered in appearance."

Aubrey looked keenly at Ida as she spoke these words, and a new idea seemed to strike him.

"He did not say that he knew me?" observed De Vaux, after a pause.

"On the contrary, he always expressed himself most eager to be introduced to you. Could he not have heard about you from some mutual friend?" asked Ida, glancing at De Vaux.

"Let us not talk any more about him," said the latter, abruptly; "I think I shall go away after this dance."

"What, so soon—why you have hardly been here above an hour!"

"Why should I stay? There is no one I care for enough to tempt me to remain. I am weary of everything and everybody."

Ida's cheek flushed with anger at this

ill-bred remark, which seemed as though it were specially directed to wound her self-love.

"Do not allow me to stand in the way of your enjoyment," she said, haughtily. "I have no doubt I can find some one who knows how to talk to a lady."

"Now, my sweet Ida, do not get angry," said De Vaux, sarcastically; "I like to see that countenance always wreathed in smiles, not lowering with frowning clouds. If I said there was no one in the ball-room that would tempt me to remain, I presume I meant to except you."

"I wish to sit down, Mr. De Vaux," said Ida, coldly, "and then you can leave me."

"Really, your kindness is overwhelming, Mademoiselle von Borgern, and now I have the honour to wish you a very good evening," observed Aubrey, with an affectedly low bow, as he relinquished Ida's arm, after conducting her to a seat on the dais.

Left to herself for a little, Ida could now think over what had passed, and she was more than ever convinced there was something mysterious in the sort of recognition which took place between Aubrey and De Burgh. Was it not ominous, too, that Aubrey's conduct towards her should again have undergone a change without any apparent motive? It was clearly impossible, for her peace of mind, that matters could go on any further as they were; but a great deal might be gained if Mr. De Burgh could be persuaded to tell her all he knew. Ida saw clearly enough that she might ere long have sufficient influence over the latter to mould him to her will, but this might only make her position with De Vaux more embarrassing. Supposing that De Burgh were to fall in love with her, what answer must she return to his suit? If she told the truth, she would have to confess that she was madly and passionately attached to another, and that man possibly his bitter

enemy. Then, again, if she at once and decidedly repelled his advances, all opportunity of learning what he could divulge would be lost. Ida, though not perfect, had too much womanly sense of what was right to feign a false passion merely to serve some temporary object.

After Ida and Aubrey quitted Mr. De Burgh, he sat still for some time, almost stupefied, trying to collect his thoughts. It was clear that he had received a great mental shock, the nature of which was known to himself alone. At last he could remain no longer, as many of the dancers now came into the apartment for refreshments, and it looked strange his continuing there in moody abstraction. He resolved to leave a scene which he was so little capable of enjoying, and for this purpose was crossing the ball-room, when he saw Ida sitting alone. Wishing to take leave of her, he turned back, and bent forward to say good night.

"Going already, Mr. De Burgh!" said Ida, with one of her sweetest smiles. "It is very unfair to desert the countess so soon."

"It is no use my staying; I have a bad headache, and am only in the way. We shall meet at the sleighing-party the day after to-morrow, I presume."

"I wish you to take me into the refreshment room for an ice," said Ida, with a glance of the eyes there was no resisting.

Ida leant rather heavily upon her companion's arm, and looked up in his face as she spoke with a confiding air that made De Burgh feel powerless to refuse anything she might ask. Although she despised them, Ida thoroughly understood all the arts of the most practised coquette, but it was very seldom that she condescended to use such artifices. Knowing that Aubrey saw through, and ridiculed in others, the wiles so freely tried to entrap him, she took

great care that he should not detect them in her case.

"I am afraid, Mr. De Burgh, you have not enjoyed this evening much. Next time we meet I hope you may be in better spirits."

"I had some very happy moments, at any rate, and they are now unexpectedly prolonged," said De Burgh, gallantly, making an effort to appear cheerful.

"Well, I believe you. I am not one of those who think everything complimentary must necessarily be insincere, and, unless I am mistaken, you would scorn to please by such subterfuges."

"You are kind, Miss von Borgern, but I trust I can seriously say you are only just. It was never my habit to try to ingratiate myself with any one by such contemptible means."

"I think we understand one another, Mr. De Burgh, as though we had been friends for years. When I meet with a

person whose ideas coincide with my own, I make a point of throwing aside all rigid ceremony and nonsense of that sort."

"Then I am fortunate in meeting you, for such an one I have long looked for in vain," said De Burgh.

"You will call upon Mr. De Vaux, I presume; indeed, you did not seem quite strangers to each other."

De Burgh did not reply at once, but glanced uneasily at his companion, who busied herself with her ice.

"I am not sure that I shall," at length he answered. "Tell me one thing—did Mr. De Vaux say anything to you about me?"

"How singular that you should both ask almost identical questions about each other. He wished to know precisely what you have just inquired. I am but a woman, and you cannot wonder if my curiosity is aroused," said Ida, with an arch glance.

"Another time," answered De Burgh, seriously, "I may perhaps tell you more. Indeed, you may have it in your power to do me an immense service; but to-night I would rather be excused from pursuing the subject further."

There was an unmistakable emphasis and determination in his words which convinced Ida that it was useless to seek to know more at present; and accordingly she asked Mr. De Burgh to conduct her back to the ball-room, after which he at once took his departure.

CHAPTER IV.

Aubrey De Vaux left the ball immediately after he parted with Ida, and was soon seated before a blazing fire in all the pleasant *déshabille* of dressing-gown and slippers, so grateful after enduring the heated atmosphere of the countess's *salons* tightly encased in an evening costume. Having lighted a cigar, he went to the adjoining study for his writing-desk, and laying this on a table close to the easy-chair, gave himself up to the enjoyment of the fragrant weed. Presently he unlocked the desk, and taking up a bundle of letters, selected two from out the number, which he proceeded to read. The first was dated the 10th of September, and ran as follows :—

"My dear Sir,

"I now sit down to fulfil the promise which I made of letting you know how my patient goes on, and whether anything is likely to transpire about so extraordinary an occurrence.

"Having made my preparations as rapidly as possible, we drove with all speed to the spot you indicated, and there we found the wounded man almost in the identical position you described. He was, of course, unconscious, and life was rapidly ebbing away owing to the great loss of blood which he had sustained; but, fortunately, your bandage had kept its place, otherwise I hardly think he could have survived. We very soon carried him to the carriage, which I managed to get close up to the castle walls, and, laying him carefully across the seats, drove home without loss of time. At that hour of the night not a soul was stirring, and I am confident that no one observed our motions. As I told you, my man is

thoroughly trustworthy, having been with me for many years, and, in the course of business, I have been frequently obliged to confide important matters to his safeguard. He undertook to blind the other servants as to how the wounded man was brought to the house without any one being aware of the circumstance, and succeeded perfectly. I searched my patient's pockets, but without finding any letters to indicate who he really was; and the only thing which I laid aside for you was the locket, which I now enclose.

"Next morning he was extremely faint, and at times delirious, during which paroxysms, although he mentioned many strange names, there were none of them sufficiently distinct to give me any clue to his identity. All that day he continued very low, and I began to fear that the consequences might be fatal. Next day, however, he rallied slightly, and the feverish symptoms which had set in began to abate.

Evidently he had a strong and healthy constitution, or he never could have survived so terrible a wound. He now began to have intervals of consciousness, and asked where he was, and who those were that he saw about him. He also inquired how it was that he came by his wound, and evidently was utterly unconscious of any of the strange circumstances which had occurred. In fact, it is my firm belief that he had been in a state of temporary insanity ever since he heard the announcement which dashed his hopes to the ground. This, I consider, explains the mystery of the attempt upon your life, and his own meditated suicide. A man of passionate, ardent temperament and strong self-will, when he found that he was hopelessly crossed and thwarted, the reaction was so powerful that his reason was temporarily overturned. Then the agonies of remorse which he suffered after the murder he of course imagined had been committed, gave the finish-

ing stroke, and my only wonder is that he ever recovered his senses at all.

"Gradually he began to acquire strength after I managed successfully to extract the pistol bullet, which had lodged between two of his right ribs. As he grew convalescent we used to have long talks together; but I abstained from alluding to the circumstances of his wound, as nothing was to be gained by recalling them. Fortunately for poor human nature, after a certain degree of mental and physical suffering has been undergone, then comes a great void which swallows up all memory of the tumultuous grief, with its terrible consequences. The mind seeks not to revert to what caused it so much pain; and, as the body acquires a more healthy tone, so does the mental system sympathize with this improvement.

"I was very nearly upon the point one day of saying to him significantly that 'Mr. Milroy, whom he formerly knew, was very well, I had recently heard;' as he would

understand my motive in mentioning this, but, upon the whole, thought it better not.

"I found my patient a most intelligent, well-read, and agreeable companion, and he over and over again thanked me for all the attention he had received. His whole style was that of a perfect gentleman, and I formed a very favourable estimate of his character. I advised him to try a complete change of scene and climate; and, when we parted, he made me a promise to return at some future period and pay me a visit. I may add that, shortly after he left my house, I received from him a munificent pecuniary remembrance, accompanied by a letter, with many expressions of regard.

"In a few days I shall write to you regarding the other person in this neighbourhood in whom you are interested.

"I remain,

"Very sincerely yours,

"R. FAREBROTHER, M.D."

The next letter was dated the nineteenth of September, and was in the following words:—

"My dear Sir,

"As mentioned in my last, I now proceed to tell you how the poor girl, whose sweet face must, I suspect, often haunt you, bears her sorrowful fate. If any of my words offend you, or the truths I tell are too unpalatable, I cannot help it, for I never disguised how strongly I disapproved your whole conduct in this matter.

"This morning I proceeded to the cottage to pay my usual occasional visit, and found her sitting in the parlour with a book before her, as if she had been reading. But it was evidently merely for form's sake that she endeavoured to follow the words before her. There is only one book which can yield the smallest solace to her bruised spirit—I mean the Bible—and

happy is she that her simple and unaffected piety enables her to realize its solemn truths. Her appearance is changed, even in the short period that has elapsed since you left her blooming with health and happiness. The bright colour of health has deserted her cheeks, which have lost their fulness; her eyes are dull, and wear a fixed melancholy expression; her smile is touching from its very sadness; and her figure is wasting away.

"She was much pleased to see me, and would not admit that she felt at all unwell. Of course, your name was never mentioned during our conversation, for I do not, as yet, feel called upon to acquaint her with my knowledge of the circumstances of her pitiable case. Among other things, she told me that the curate of our village—a most amiable and excellent young man, by the way—is a constant visitor. This I was aware of; and I also know that he is deeply in love with her, which only makes the

matter worse. Indeed, it has been her misfortune to be gifted with so winning and sweet a disposition, as to make every man who has approached her at once to lose his heart. This good young clergyman's devotion appears to be touching, more especially as I believe he is partly aware that his suit must be hopeless.

"This is the worst feature of the case; for, if she could only emulate your callousness of character, the wound would soon heal, and her life might ultimately be spared. For I solemnly warn you that, in my opinion, unless her affections can be so far revivified as to allow her to forget the past and yield to the fervent admiration of her present honourable lover, this girl will not live another year. Unhappily, her heart is of so true and noble a nature, that —like the ancient Venetian glass which, once polluted by poison, instantly shattered to atoms—it has received the deadly potion, and is now irrevocably broken.

"Her worthy aunt is greatly distressed at the woeful change which has come over her beloved niece, and told me privately that she suspected the real cause. The good woman knew of her attachment to you, and expresses herself in the bitterest manner concerning your cruel desertion of her niece. She tells me that the poor girl still fondly clings to the hope that you may one day return, and that this delusive idea prevents her from reciprocating the young clergyman's love.

"It remains for you to decide whether you will make a tardy reparation for the havoc you have caused, or suffer this girl slowly to pine away. You vaguely alluded to some mysterious misfortune constantly impending over you, which renders futile all your efforts to amend your whole course of life. The force of this I cannot admit until I am clearly made aware of the nature of this dreaded calamity. It is you, not I, who will have one day to answer for the

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consequences of this wayward freak of fancy, that seems certain to bring disaster upon one innocent head.

"I shall not write again until I hear from you.

"I remain,

"Yours sincerely,

"R. Farebrother, M.D."

Both letters were addressed in the corner, "Edward Milroy."

"Well, there is small consolation in these letters," said Aubrey, with a peculiar smile, after he had perused the letters; "the medical man certainly does not spare Mr. Milroy." At these words he gave a wild sardonic laugh.

Again going to the desk, he opened it and took out the photograph of a young man of open, pleasant countenance, which he examined attentively.

"There can be no doubt about it," he said, musingly. "This man De Burgh,

and Lawrence must be identical. But how strange that he should turn up here!—and what can I say if he should make too minute inquiries about the resemblance which he undoubtedly noticed. One would think, for his own sake, that he would wish the whole affair hushed up; but there is no saying how remorse of conscience may make him act. At any rate, my course of action is clear. He must not be allowed to harbour the faintest suspicion that the likeness is anything more than an extraordinary accident. I am not going to give up the game yet, after having played it so skilfully. But what has been my reward? Have I gained one hour of happiness?—ever passed a single peaceful day in unalloyed enjoyment? Had I not better bury myself in some unknown corner of the world, away from human ken, where I may pass my existence without that constant terrible shadow ever lurking on my path. I believe that Ida would willingly accom-

pany me, even though shorn of all my guilty splendour; but there is something about her that repels me. That woman can read my very soul; and I fear her meeting with De Burgh, and her jealous suspicions being aroused. Fool that I was, to trifle with her last night!—for she is a beautiful serpent, and some day may encompass me in her deadly folds. Fortunate has it been for me that the only human being who held me completely in his power should be removed from the scene by death at so opportune a moment. And yet, of what avails this, when I have a stern monitor within my breast that never ceases to goad me with maddening memories of my guilt? My punishment has been bitter, and the worst yet remains;—and now, too late, I wish that I could unravel the tangled skein that I have wound about me!"

CHAPTER V.

On the following day Aubrey was in his study, when a servant entered to inform him that a gentleman wished to see him upon particular business. The hour at which he called proved that it could be no mere passing visitor; so Aubrey requested that he might be shown up at once. Accordingly the next minute the door was opened, and the stranger—who was none other than Mr. De Burgh—entered the room.

De Vaux rose from his chair at the same moment, and gazed with interest and astonishment at his visitor. The latter looked pale and agitated, but had made up his mind how to act, and was prepared to

stand the consequences. He was the first to break the awkward silence.

"Mr. De Vaux," he said, firmly, "I have judged it the best plan at once to present myself to you, in order that all doubts as to our relative position may be cleared up."

De Vaux courteously bent his head and motioned the other to a chair, resuming his own at the same time.

"You will excuse me," he replied, "if I express my astonishment at what you have just said, for as I never had the pleasure of meeting you before, I am at a loss to understand what matters you allude to."

De Burgh almost started from his seat in amazement at these words, and surveyed Aubrey with a searching look.

"Can it be that I am mistaken? No, no, it is impossible—your eye, your voice, everything are exactly similar."

"May I be permitted to inquire who it

is that I resemble so strongly, and what were the circumstances connected with this unknown individual, that seem to have a disquieting effect upon you?" said Aubrey, with great politeness.

"Did you never pass some time in a village in the west of England under the name of Milroy?" asked De Burgh, eagerly.

"I may have been in the west of England during my life, but I certainly always was known by my proper name. I assure you there is some singular misapprehension on your part; but I am very glad to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance. I hope I shall see you at my ball next week."

There was an easy self-possession and openness of demeanour in Mr. De Vaux that convinced De Burgh he had made a mistake; and he saw that it was necessary to give some explanation of his singular proceedings.

"You must think me the strangest

fellow in the world," he said, apologetically, "to disturb you so early on such an errand, but it was an affair of the greatest consequence to me to have my doubts satisfied. Possibly you may have a brother who strongly resembles you?"

"No; I am the last of our family," replied De Vaux. "I trust you will not think it impertinent if I inquire what was the nature of the incident which connected you with the individual I resemble; at any rate, let me hope it was of an agreeable nature."

"Now I must beg of you to excuse me, Mr. De Vaux. The circumstances were of a most distressing and painful character; indeed, you may remember the agitation which I displayed when we first met at the countess's ball."

"I understand you perfectly," replied Aubrey; "we have all of us come through scenes that we would willingly forget; and sometimes it is strange how a trivial inci-

dent may cause the unpleasant recollection vividly to recur again."

"Had you been the man for whom I took you," said De Burgh, sadly, "an enormous weight would have been lifted from my breast, which now only oppresses me worse than ever. You were kind enough to wish me to come to your ball, but I fear that I shall have no spirits for such an event."

"As you please, Mr. De Burgh; but you may be sure of a hearty welcome if you come. I think I should recommend change of scene and travel if you are suffering from depression of spirits. I myself have proved the efficacy of the remedy."

"For the last six months nearly I have been incessantly moving about, and there is no doubt one's attention is pleasantly distracted by the variety of interesting scenes through which one passes. By the way, what a charming person that Mademoiselle

von Borgern is who is on a visit to you; she seems very clever, and assuredly is very handsome."

"Yes, Ida certainly is intelligent and nice looking, but she makes little show in public. However, people generally come to like her when they know her better. She can scarcely be called a foreigner, having been born in and lived almost all her life in England."

"Her father was an old friend of yours, I believe?" said Mr. De Burgh.

"Yes, very intimate, and he lives a great deal with me."

After a few more commonplace remarks, De Burgh rose up and took leave. As he was descending the staircase he met Ida, who, when she saw him, gave a start of surprise.

"Good morning, Mr. De Burgh," she said, with a smile; "well, you certainly have lost no time in paying your visit to Mr. De Vaux."

De Burgh stammered out some reply, for, in truth, he did not know very well what to say. It seemed very unaccountable why he should take such an unusually early opportunity of calling upon a man he seemed so anxious to avoid the previous night.

"I suppose we shall positively see you at our ball next week?" continued Ida; "that is, if you can so far get the better of your aversion to such frivolities!"

"Yes, I mean to do myself the honour of waiting upon you, Mademoiselle von Borgern."

"Well, we shall see if you keep your promise, for you seem fond of changing your mind. *Au revoir*," said Ida, as she lightly tripped downstairs.

Mr. De Burgh was now more bewildered than ever, and, as he left the house, anxiously revolved in his mind what he had just heard. The more he thought of what Aubrey had stated, the more singular

did his conduct appear. He now reproached himself for not more calmly reflecting how unlikely it was that a man of Aubrey's position and wealth could in any way be connected with an event so terrible and mysterious.

CHAPTER VI.

It was the evening of the grand ball given by Aubrey De Vaux, for which extraordinary preparations had been made in the most lavish and costly style of splendour. He had made up his mind to startle the fashionable world of St. Petersburgh by the unparalleled magnificence of the entertainment, and had exhausted all the resources of his own elegant fancy, assisted by the most renowned decorators of the northern capital.

The exterior of the house was all covered with a grand illumination of festoons of coloured lamps, and a canopy or tent was brought out from the entrance-hall to the verge of the pavement where the guests

alighted. This canopy was lined with alternate rows of white, green, and red calico, and lighted up by glass globes with coloured devices on them, while vases of rare exotics imbedded in green moss were ranged along its sides. The entrance-hall was one rich mass of dark blue velvet, which covered the walls and ceiling in heavy folds, relieved by massive silver fringe, and the whole harmonized well with a carpeting of crimson cloth which covered the floor. At each corner was a marble statue, and a lovely malachite fountain played in the centre, round which beautiful flowers were grouped. As the guests entered this hall each lady was presented with a bouquet of rare flowers, arranged with consummate taste, in a delicate gold filagree holder, the bordering of which was of real lace. Attached to the programme of dances, which every one received, was a small gold pencil-case, so careful had Aubrey been to the minutest details. All along the passages

and staircases that led from one apartment to another were arranged lovely masses of flowers, and mirrors were skilfully placed at intervals so as to reflect the brilliant display in endless variety of aspect. Several smaller apartments were fitted up as grottoes, tents, and arbours. One had all the appearance of a beautiful marine cave, the sides formed of great masses of spar and quartz, which were imbedded in different coloured mosses, and a small stream of perfumed water trickled over the moss with a wonderfully natural effect. This grotto was faintly illumined by means of lime-light, and was greatly admired. Another represented an Arabian tent, the sides being formed by alternate rows of white and crimson silk, and an exquisite alabaster lamp, suspended by a richly gilt chain from the centre of the roof, lit up the tent with delightfully subdued effect. All around were stuffed silken cushions for the guests to recline upon, and two very handsome girls, dressed in Oriental costume,

dispensed sherbet, coffee, and Arabian confections to all who entered. But it was upon the principal ball-room itself that the most lavish amount of decoration was laid out. In order that a perfectly novel effect might be produced, every portion of the walls and ceiling was completely covered over with crimson velvet. Over this surface again innumerable devices in gold and silver cord were traced, and the lighting up was effected by multitudes of silver sconces and candelabra. The orchestra and musicians were completely concealed by a screen of palm leaves, and flowering plants. Nothing had been neglected that wealth and taste combined could produce, and it was universally admitted that no entertainment for many years had been so splendid or successful.

But amid all this gorgeous display Aubrey De Vaux moved with a moody and abstracted air, although he exerted himself to see that his guests were properly attended to. Many

a bright pair of eyes were fixed in wondering admiration upon the handsome Englishman who had so suddenly dazzled the capital with his wealth and extravagance. It was noted that, of all this brilliant throng, he alone was never seen to smile, and in his dark eye no gleam of revelry shone forth. He moved from one beautiful woman to another with graceful words of welcome, but although smiles from lips whose peerless ruby no painter could emulate were freely bestowed on him, Aubrey scarce lingered for an instant by the side of such transcendent charmers. He felt as though he could laugh aloud in mere mockery of all this hollow display, when he thought of the secret which was locked up in his bosom.

Mr. De Burgh and Ida were walking together when Aubrey passed them. He bowed to the former, and gave a glance at Ida as she moved on—a glance full of meaning.

"How do you like Mr. De Vaux," said Ida, as Aubrey passed; "did you find him the sort of person you expected?"

"I like him extremely," replied De Burgh; "I called upon him the other morning at a rather unseemly hour, but nothing could be pleasanter than his manner towards me."

"Yes, I was surprised to meet you, for you seemed so undecided the night before whether you would even come to this ball."

De Burgh was silent for a little, as though he was reflecting upon something, and then, turning to Ida, said—

"Don't you think De Vaux seems to have something oppressing his spirits this evening, or is that his habitual expression of countenance?"

"I did not notice anything unusual in his manner to-night, but Mr. De Vaux has so many whims and caprices of temper that I am never surprised at his singularities being commented upon."

"Do you know, Miss von Borgern, that there is some mystery connected with Mr. De Vaux which it is of the utmost importance to me should be cleared up, and I feel sure you could aid me. You must pardon me intruding these private matters upon your notice, but I believe you will not misunderstand my motives."

Ida's heart beat fast, now that the subject of such singular interest to her was introduced, but she judged it best not to let her intentions appear.

"You are quite safe with me, Mr. De Burgh, and any information I can give is at your service."

"Do you remember that photograph which you noticed in my album, and inquired about as if you knew the face?"

It was now Ida's turn to affect ignorance, so she considered for a moment before she replied.

"Was it that gentleman with——"

"Oh no, not a gentleman at all," interrupted De Burgh; "it was a girl's picture—that one which struck you from its simple costume—in fact you particularly asked who she was."

"Now that you recall the circumstance, I think I know the one you mean. Do you say that Mr. De Vaux knows her? Well, tell me her name, and I will ask him all about her."

De Burgh hesitated for a moment, and then replied evasively—

"Oh, the name is of little consequence; but do you think you could manage to let him see the photograph itself?"

"Certainly I could, if you give it to me; but you are so excessively mysterious about the matter that I do not know what to think," said Ida.

"Briefly, then, the facts are simply these. Some nine or ten months ago I was studying for an examination in a secluded village in the west of England, where I had pur-

posely gone to be away from all distractions, when by accident I formed the acquaintance of the original of that picture. I was young, ardent, and excited by overwork; but whatever was the cause, I formed a violent passion for the girl, who really was most interesting and beautiful. But I had a rival who was preferred before me, and that was no other than Mr. De Vaux, or his perfect facsimile in appearance, for such a wonderful resemblance I never saw. My firm conviction is that my reason gave way for a time, because all recollection of events since one particular afternoon, until I found myself an inmate in a certain medical man's house, seems to be blotted from my memory. One thing, however, is fixed on my recollection, that is, the face of my rival; and if De Vaux is not that man, then he must have a brother, or some relative, the exact image of himself. Now, can you help me, Miss von Borgern, to unravel this mystery?"

"And if you find that Mr. De Vaux really was the rival of whom you speak, what will happen then?" inquired Ida.

"The puzzling part of the thing is, that I asked him the question directly, and he assured me he knew nothing of what I meant; so it would appear that I am mistaken. And yet I feel convinced in my own mind that he is in some way connected with the episode of which I speak; and I am tormented with a vague memory of a certain terrible incident, which I wish to have cleared up."

"It appears to me, Mr. De Burgh, that although you may be very anxious to arrive at the bottom of the affair, yet in the face of Mr. De Vaux's denial of any knowledge of what you allude to, you are at once stopped."

"I thought that you might possibly, by showing him the girl's portrait accidentally, find out from his manner if he knew who it was?" said De Burgh.

"And do you suppose that he was deeply attached to this unknown girl?" inquired Ida, with a beating heart.

"I have no reason to think otherwise; and there is no doubt that she was devoted to him. Is it not possible that he could have a brother exactly resembling him in features, whom he does not choose to acknowledge?" observed Mr. De Burgh.

"I am certain that if he had any brother, from my father's great intimacy with Mr. De Vaux, I should have heard of him long ago," said Ida.

"It is altogether a mysterious circumstance, and I confess I am at a loss to know what to do. At any rate, I hope you will be able to give me some little aid, as you have peculiar facilities for sounding Mr. De Vaux, when he is in the humour to be questioned on the subject."

"Was there something so very attractive about this girl that she produced such an effect upon you, who must have been accus-

tomed to the society of ladies of a very different stamp to a plain country girl?" inquired Ida, with jealous interest.

"Undoubtedly she was possessed of a purity of mind and simple fascination of manner which would attract the notice of any man, in whatever rank of life. Although she rejected my suit, I shall never think of her but with a feeling of respect and admiration," said De Burgh.

"It is a strange romance altogether; and now you have sought these distant parts to obtain relief from the sad remembrance in the distractions of travel and business? I trust that you may soon meet with one who will console you for your disappointment," said Ida, with a slight sneer, as she felt hurt at the glowing terms in which De Burgh talked of one she already hated in her heart. Soon after this her hand was claimed by some one for a waltz, and the conversation was not renewed that evening.

The hours flew past, and amid the voluptuous excitement of the dazzling scene Aubrey alone seemed cold and unmoved. Occasionally he danced, but it was with some one whose plain looks caused her to receive little attention; and it appeared as though his heart was not in the gay scene passing before his eyes. He did not approach Ida, but several times she observed his glance turned towards her, and he seemed to watch her motions. She felt agitated by many and conflicting emotions as she caught his calm gaze, and wondered what was passing in his mind. The state of suspense in which she was kept was intolerable; and she saw that it was absolutely necessary that something must be done to bring matters to a crisis. Ida was in little humour to respond to the compliments and badinage of those with whom she danced, but she did her best to assume a gay and happy bearing.

The ball had now lasted many hours, and

at length a perceptible falling off in the guests began to appear; the numerous refreshment and ante-rooms became gradually deserted, and in the principal ball-room a marked difference could be seen. It was only by slow degrees that the brilliant assemblage dispersed, for no one wished to quit a scene of such dazzling splendour. The morning was very far advanced ere the last of the guests bid adieu to Aubrey, who was now left alone in the glittering halls. He looked round upon the magnificent apartments so lately thronged with such an array of youth and loveliness, and sighed as he thought of his singular isolation and loneliness.

Aubrey now left the dancing-room, and in passing by the apartment fitted up as a Turkish tent, he observed a female figure reclining on the cushions. Wondering who was here after all the guests had departed, he advanced towards her, and then saw that it was Ida. Her eyes were half closed, as

though she felt wearied and overcome with slumber; but at his approach she at once started up, and a deep crimson flush overspread her countenance. She was angry at being detected here, for it looked as though she had planned this interview, and wished to thrust herself under Aubrey's notice.

"You here all by yourself, Ida?" said De Vaux, throwing himself down on the cushions by her side. "I thought I was left alone with the dying wax-lights and faded flowers."

"I suspect I must have fallen asleep, for I meant to have retired long ago. I suppose papa has disappeared some time since?" said Ida.

"Yes; at least I missed him from the ball-room more than an hour ago. But stay a few minutes; I should like to have a little conversation with you, Ida dear."

Aubrey looked at his companion with all his old fondness of gaze; and Ida again

felt the well-remembered thrill, but she could not help reflecting how often she had been deluded by this deceitful show of kindness. It was only prolonging the ultimate misery she must experience thus to dally with her feelings, and far better would it be at once to lay bare her heart to the man whose wanton caprice was the cause of all this unhappiness.

"How have you enjoyed this night, Ida?" continued De Vaux, in his gentlest manner. "You looked so beautiful that many a brilliant Russian belle envied your charms."

"I cannot say that I felt so happy and light-hearted as I looked; but what of that? my feelings can have no interest for you, Mr. De Vaux," said Ida, reproachfully.

"Did you not promise to call me Aubrey, dear Ida?" said De Vaux, taking the cold hand which hung listlessly by his companion's side.

The touch of his hand seemed to act

with strange effect upon Ida, for she drew herself back, and spoke in quick, nervous tones.

"No, Mr. De Vaux, I can allow this to go on no more. Too long have I suffered my feelings to be trifled with, and my most sacred affections made mere sport of in passing away an idle hour. Do you understand what I mean?"

This abrupt and unexpected appeal astonished De Vaux, and he looked in wonderment at Ida, whose face was flushed with excitement, and even her frame trembled with an agitation she could not subdue.

"Ida, dear, I confess I feel at a loss to comprehend your meaning," said De Vaux, soothingly—for his heart smote him as he thought of the wantonness with which he had paltered with her affections.

"Aubrey De Vaux! it is now eight years since my father first came to live under your roof, and then I was but a little innocent child. How far it was prudent

thus to throw me in the way of one who, whatever may be said of him, at any rate is gifted with talents and fascination of manner sufficient to captivate the heart of any woman, it is now too late to determine. At first, of course, being a mere child, you took no notice of me; but it was far otherwise with me. Thrown almost entirely upon my own resources for occupation and amusement, and feeling myself unsuited to mingle with the fashionable guests who filled your house, what wonder if my whole thoughts too often centred upon you. Being naturally observant I found means to study your character in its various phases; and, amidst all your frivolity, indifference, and eccentricity, I detected the noble faculties of which you were possessed. As I grew up you too began to take more notice of me, and then first commenced to whisper dangerous words in my ear, which, forgotten as soon as uttered by you, were, alas! too fondly treasured up by me. You

encouraged me to offer my opinions and sentiments even upon your own moral character and mode of living, and you even went the length of laying bare to me the very recesses of your heart. Who can blame me if I began to associate all my ideas of happiness with your image, and nourished in secret the first germs of a deep-rooted passion. Then, on a sudden, you would cease to look near me, and I was left to my own torturing conjectures as to the cause of this coldness; but, ere long, this was succeeded by yet warmer manifestations of interest. All this, you must have known, could only rivet still deeper the bonds in which I was entangled; but you seemed to care little for that. But why do I dwell on these torturing details, all of which are but mere repetitions of the same story? Only during the latter half of last year you increased in intensity those smoothly flowing, honied words, which awakened feelings I cannot now lull asleep

again. My story is nearly all told now, and you can well divine how it must end. You know how I love you, but you ought not to have suffered me to drink so deep of the poison. There is no need to tell how hopeless is this unhappy passion, but I have a right to demand that you no longer equivocate and sport with feelings that I hold sacred. I care not what you think of this avowal—it is only confessing what, long ere this, you must have been well aware of. But, for pity's sake, do not seek to deepen the wound!"

Overcome by her long pent-up emotion, Ida burst into a paroxysm of tears, and, burying her head in the cushions, gave free vent to her feelings. Aubrey De Vaux listened to her burning words in silence, but his conscience reproached him bitterly for all the misery he had occasioned. Although he was accustomed to give little heed to any compunctions which, for the time being, might occur to him, still he had,

on several occasions, felt he was deluding Ida with a show of tenderness that was certain to bear evil fruit. And when he looked at the exquisite figure and marked the faultless grace of the weeping girl by his side, he might well own that she bore away the palm even from the countless highly-born beauties who had that evening been his guests.

"Ida—dearest Ida!" he said, pressing her hand, "I own I have been to blame, but you do not know all the palliating circumstances I can urge in my defence. Believe me when I say that no woman that breathes has the influence over me you have. In truth, Ida, I love you as much as I dare love any one, but my crime is in allowing myself to cherish such feelings even for the briefest moment. Oh, Ida! if you knew the agony of mind which I have to suffer in the secret midnight hours—if you knew the awful burden which I have to bear—the ghastly skeleton ever flitting

before my eyes—you would then understand why it is I seek distraction in anything that can for an instant make me forget what I am."

These words were not without their effect upon Ida, who remembered that De Vaux had once or twice hinted that some terrible secret weighed upon his mind. It was sweet, too, to hear that no one held any sway over his heart but herself, although there was still the incident of the photograph and lock of hair to be explained.

"But why not confide in me if this be true, Aubrey? May not I be permitted to share this terrible burden if, as you say, you really love me? Do not fear that I will be appalled by any revelation, however dreadful, although I know the crime—if crime it be—might force you to live in obscurity and disgrace while life lasts."

"No, no, Ida!—not now; some day, possibly, I may tell you everything. Meanwhile, let us forget the past and go on as

before. Cease to think of me but as your true friend and brother, and I will take care that no feelings of love will make me forget the duty I owe to you, my sister."

Ida shook her head as she replied—

"This can never be; and I must at once quit the roof of one whom henceforward I must regard as a foe to my peace of mind—for, alas! all my hopes of happiness centre round him. Do you suppose it possible that I can forget all the passionate moments of joy which have been passed by your side, and, by a mere effort of will, stifle those pure feelings of love which have been the cherished romance of my whole life? How little do you know the true nature of woman's heart if you think that, at the bidding of reason, she can calmly dismiss from her mind the memory of a first and only love!"

"But, dearest Ida, where can you go to? —what home have you? No; we shall

plunge into pleasure and excitement until this passion shall fade away into a bright dream, and soon again we will seek fresh enjoyment in travel and entire change of scene," said Aubrey, as he clasped Ida's hand within his own.

"My mind is fully made up," replied Ida, firmly; "I must return to England, and I shall speak to my father about it to-morrow. For a short time, if you allow me, I will go to your house in Warwickshire until papa can arrange where my home for the future shall be, although everywhere will be the same dreary wilderness to me now. But oh! let me entreat you, before we part, not to retain for ever, locked in your breast, that dreadful secret which seems to cast such a blighting shadow over your path."

"Rest assured, Ida, that if I ever do disclose it to any one it shall be to you; but I fervently hope this resolution of yours may not be final. I had hoped to have

seen you well and happily married, and I know of several offers from men of position and fortune which will shortly be laid at your feet."

Ida smiled disdainfully at these words, and then involuntarily pressed Aubrey's hand, looking wistfully in his face.

"May I have the poor consolation of knowing that you did really once love me, and that your heart is not even now filled with another's image?" she inquired, earnestly.

"I swear that you have all the love my heart ever knew; and no one, high or low, can gainsay this," said De Vaux, emphatically. These words were balm to Ida's spirit, and she allowed herself to lean upon Aubrey's breast with a sweet feeling of languor, knowing that this might be the last undisturbed interview they would have together. Aubrey, too, felt moved by many conflicting sensations, and never had he been so sensible of the great beauty of

person with which Ida was gifted. He could not help owning to himself that it was much better that she and her father should leave him after what had taken place, but he felt what a blank would be thus created in his house. Ida looked full into his eyes, with an expression of deepest love. Bending slightly over her, he imprinted a long kiss upon her lips, and both were silent for a time. Ida resolved to drink the pure nectar while yet it mantled in the cup, for she feared that henceforth the waters of bitterness would be her portion. It would be vain to analyse the delirious sensations of pleasure she experienced when listening to the sweet words he murmured in her ear, and it was long ere they tore themselves asunder, while in their dreams that night they once more drank deep of the enchanting elixir of love.

CHAPTER VII.

A WEEK had passed since the night of the ball given by Aubrey De Vaux, and almost every day some scene of gaiety occurred to distract Ida's thoughts from the subject of her departure for England. She had kept to her word, and her father fully approved of the resolution she had formed, for he saw the danger of allowing his daughter to remain under Aubrey's roof. This very morning the Baron and De Vaux were talking over the future arragements which were necessary.

"There is no doubt it is a step which should have been taken long ago," said the Baron to his friend; "Ida is a girl full of romance and impulse, and it was only na-

tural that she should give way to the temptation ever before her eyes.

"What you must do, Baron, is to get her married as soon as possible, and she will soon forget all this girlish freak of fancy. You see I can never get on without you, for there will be no one who understands my affairs so well to consult on an emergency. However, as it happens, the separation could not have taken place at a more opportune moment, because I shall not be back in England for a year at least, and you can be all that time at my different residences."

"Yes, this is true, and by the time you return Ida may very possibly be comfortably settled in life," returned the Baron. "I think she will pine and fret for a little while, but time and change of scene must soon effect a cure."

"Then, when I do return, if she has not married meanwhile, I will soon find a house for you in the country, where we can communicate as easily as if we were still under

the same roof. I wish you could have gone with me on this new tour I am projecting, for I intend to visit India and China, and one really needs a friend in a journey of this sort," said De Vaux.

"I should like it as much as you, my friend," said the Baron, "but another opportunity may occur. How much longer shall you remain in St. Petersburgh?"

"Oh, until the end of the season, I suppose, for there is no use setting off to travel in the depths of winter, especially if I carry out my intention of going across Russian Tartary, and so getting to China by land route."

"You had better think twice before you encounter the perils of such a journey, for the savage tribes, through whose territories you must pass, value human life very slightly, and it would be a dreary termination to your career to be impaled alive for the gratification of some ferocious Tartar chief," said the Baron, laughing.

"I assure you, Baron, there are few living who hold life at a cheaper value than I do, and I have long since got over any childish fear at the prospect of a sudden death."

"All this is very pleasant when one is smoking one's cigar, lounging in an easy chair by the fireside, but when the grim messenger meets us face to face it is astonishing what cowards we become," observed the Baron, philosophically.

Aubrey was now busied with the *Times*, which was just brought in by a servant, and the conversation dropped.

Meanwhile Ida was employing herself with her preparations for returning to England. As the time approached nearer and nearer she began still more to realize how difficult it would be to part with Aubrey, and almost repented of the resolution she had formed. There was something soothing and delightful in being under the same roof as Aubrey even although they seldom met, and she shuddered to think how it

would be when they should be separated altogether. In truth her pride alone prevented her from asking the Baron to postpone their return, for the present at any rate, but she took care to conceal this vacillation of purpose within her own bosom. She hoped that Aubrey would confide the mysterious secret to her, which seemed to weigh so heavily upon him, before they separated, but, as yet, he had never spoken again on the subject. Often and often she wondered what it could be, and invariably came to the conclusion that it, in some way, was connected with Mr. De Burgh. Since the night of the ball given by Aubrey she had not spoken to De Burgh on the subject, but she hoped to have an opportunity before her departure. As it so happened a servant just now entered the room to announce the gentleman in question.

"Good morning, Miss von Borgern; this is rather an unceremonious hour to call, but, to my astonishment, I heard last

night that you were about to start for England."

"And why were you so astonished, Mr. De Burgh?" replied Ida, with a smile.

"Well, I felt sure that you intended to remain until the close of the season at least, and besides, I thought you would have told me of such an early departure being contemplated. I hope we shall meet in England, however, for I mean to return there myself at no very distant date."

"Now it is my turn to express astonishment, Mr. De Burgh, considering what your motives were for choosing this place as a residence. But perhaps it is part of your programme not to remain very long in one place."

"Oh, no; but I have a reason for wishing to return. By the way, did you find an opportunity of asking Mr. De Vaux what I am so anxious to learn?" inquired Mr. De Burgh.

"I did, indirectly, without actually ques-

tioning him on the subject, and feel certain that you must be mistaken," said Ida.

"I am really greatly obliged, Miss von Borgern, for the trouble you have taken, but I shall let the matter rest where it is at present. Does Mr. De Vaux think of returning to England with you and your father?"

"Anything but that, for I believe he means to visit China before he turns his steps homewards again."

"And must I say good-bye to you now—is your stay here already a mere question of hours?" inquired Mr. De Burgh.

"Yes, this is the last time we shall meet, and when our acquaintance may be renewed I cannot tell," replied Ida, with a trace of melancholy in her tone.

"You will always remember that my utmost services are at your command," said De Burgh, rising; "and of course all that passed between us on the subject of Mr.

De Vaux is to be considered strictly confidential."

"Most certainly it is; good-bye," was all Ida said, as she rose to receive Mr. De Burgh's adieux.

When he was gone Ida sat musing for some time upon the singular circumstance which had invested De Burgh with so much interest in her eyes. She really liked him, too, for he was much superior to the ordinary run of fashionable men she was in the habit of meeting, and there was a strong tinge of romance in his character which was in keeping with her own. A powerful conviction, too, existed in her mind that this was not the last time they should meet, and that her future plans would, in some way or other, depend upon the issue of his surmises regarding Mr. De Vaux. Altogether the prospect now opening up to Ida seemed at best but a dreary one, and it appeared as though most of her pleasures would henceforth be those of retrospection, for those of

anticipation at once fled away into interminable gloom.

* * * *

Two days after this conversation the Baron and Ida left St. Petersburgh for Germany, as they intended to remain some little time in his native town, which they had not visited for several years. The parting between her and De Vaux was very calm, outwardly at least. But Ida's heart sank within her as she felt the last touch of his hand, and marked the parting glance of his eyes, for an indefinite presentiment haunted her that some calamity was impending which would prove fatal to the hopes of both. The bright dream of her youth seemed already to have passed away, and it was with feelings of unutterable sadness that she took her last lingering look of De Vaux, as he waved his hand towards her with a fond adieu. Even the bright sunshine which shone with meri-

dian brilliancy, until each snow crystal sparkled like a dewdrop, brought not a ray of comfort to lighten her gloomy forebodings, and she felt as if a dull heavy weight oppressed her, from which she would never get free.

CHAPTER VIII.

Again our story passes over a period of three months, and the scene is transferred to the pretty cottage where Mary Forester lived. During the past winter she had never been allowed by the doctor to go out of doors, and, now that the sweet month of May was opening, she longed once more to gather primroses under the pleasant greenwood. But, alas! the ravages of a dangerous disease told with sad force upon her enfeebled frame, and all she could now do, was to sit at an open window, where, during the heat of the day, she would enjoy the scent of the opening flowers wafted in by the breeze. Although her face was very pale, it still retained much of its beauty, and

when, at intervals, a smile visited her lips, it brought back all the old loveliness of expression which touched the hearts of those who approached her. In truth, she was in a critical condition, for having unfortunately caught a very severe cold shortly after her last interview with Milroy, this had settled upon her lungs; so between mental and bodily affliction, she seemed slowly wasting away.

For many weeks after Milroy's mysterious disappearance she hoped on, buoying herself up with the thought that he might merely have been called away on business. But, as time wore on, and he never wrote a line to say where he was, she began to believe that, either some accident had happened to him, or his absence must be intentional. Often, too, she was haunted with the idea that Lawrence might have been the cause of his rival's disappearance, for she never forgot the singular agitation of the former, when he suddenly crossed her path that

evening. But her charitable and forgiving spirit always dismissed this idea as soon as it occurred, for she believed Lawrence to be incapable of any foul play. Very wearying was the unutterable sickness of heart she experienced during those long sad hours, but Mary was blessed with the pure consolation derived from a truly religious soul. All the earthly affections which she had to bestow were lavished upon the man who had won her heart, but the truest devotion of her gentle spirit was offered to that Being whom she had early been taught to adore.

The Reverend Wilfred Massey was a constant visitor at the cottage, and Mary had come to look forward to his appearance with pleasure, and to feel disappointment if any duty should prevent him from making his usual call. But beyond this, her feelings carried Mary no further, nor could all the curate's tenderest attentions or profoundest homage deepen the impression. But it was far otherwise with him, for Mr.

Massey was deeply in love with Mary, and each visit only fanned the flame. Even her avowed preference for another was ineffectual to turn the current of his affections; he always hoped that time would heal the wound from which Mary suffered so deeply, more especially as she never heard a word from Milroy. Her continued ill health was a subject of the deepest misgiving to Mr. Massey, and he saw the bloom gradually fading from her cheek with the tenderest anxiety. Still the progress of her illness was so gradual and stealthy, that the hopes of those who watched the sufferer were constantly raised by the delusive glow which so often overspreads the cheek when the fatal blight is only too surely eating its way.

Mary's worthy aunt, Mrs. Forester, was greatly pleased with the curate's attentions, and strongly counselled her niece to forget her unfortunate attachment to Milroy. She felt it would be a most advantageous match for Mary to make if she consented to

marry Mr. Massey, because all anxiety concerning what was to become of her niece would be at an end.

"My dear Mary," the good woman would say, "you may depend upon it that the greatest happiness would result from your marriage with Mr. Massey, who is the most amiable and unselfish young man I ever knew. His mind is fully stored with pious knowledge, and his disposition is goodness itself, for no one hereabout, high or low, is ignorant of the many good works he does. Only think what a quiet, useful life you would lead as the wife of this excellent young man, and what a comfortable settlement it offers to you, instead of being left alone after my death. You need never think more of Milroy, because, if he had cared anything for you, he would not have deserted you in this manner. If he is dead, why then it is no use fretting yourself about him, and the best thing is to dismiss him altogether from your mind. I wonder you

are not touched with the deep affection Mr. Massey so evidently feels towards you, and he too, who is so run after by girls far handsomer and richer than you, my dear child. Now, do promise me that you will accept his attentions Mary, dear, and I shall be so glad."

But all the excellent woman's entreaties were of no avail, for Mary refused to give any definite promise to Mr. Massey, although he fondly hoped that he saw symptoms of her yielding to his ardent solicitations. Still he knew no happier moments than those he passed by her side, listening to the gentle tones of her voice, as they conversed on the subjects about which she loved to hear. Every spare moment which he had was spent at the cottage, and it began to be whispered about the village that the curate's attentions towards pretty Mary Forester were of a warmer nature than the mere watchful interest a clergyman takes in the spiritual welfare of his parishioners.

"I wonder what Mr. Massey does so often down the Hazel lane," observed Miss Smithers the dress-maker to her friend Miss Balsam, the apothecary's sister; "I am sure if I have met him once. I have met him a dozen times in the last fortnight, coming that way out of the wood."

"Oh! don't you know that he is in love with Mary Forester," replied Miss Balsam, "and that is a short cut to the cottage where her aunt and she live? Why, bless you, he never can hear the name of Forester without getting as red as the trimming on my new bonnet!"

"Well, I'm sure, what he can see in the girl I can't imagine," remarked the first speaker. "She is a shy, stupid thing, with a white silly face, and besides, they say she is dying of consumption. And what business has he to marry, that can hardly keep himself in decent clothes; let alone that he lives in two small rooms over Mr. Stubbs the grocer's shop."

"Yes; and they say that the squire gets him to come and read prayers to his servants every Sunday evening, just on purpose to give him a good dinner at least once every week, for he was heard to say one day that Mr. Massey looked as if he was half-starved," observed Miss Balsam.

"For my part," remarked her companion, "I never could see anything to admire in Mr. Massey; he seemed always to stand upon the dignity of his family; and as for his sermons, they never edify me at any rate, for, to tell the truth, I can't keep awake when he is in the pulpit."

"Indeed, you may well say that," said Miss Balsam; "and, between you and me, I don't believe that he really possesses the true spirit of charity and religion at all. I know I have often heard him running down those that he fancies are in a better position than himself. Now, I am sure nothing is worse than speaking ill of one's neighbours."

From the foregoing remarks, which occurred during a conversation between two of Mr. Massey's female parishioners, it will be perceived that his attentions to Mary were the theme of unfavourable comment with some of the fair ones who formerly were wont to smile upon his ministrations. Such, however, is the inevitable fate which will befall any single young divine who manifests a tacit preference for the society of a beautiful and loving girl to the ill-natured jargon of soured and scheming old maids. But the displeasure of a few was completely outweighed by the affectionate liking of the many, for Mr. Massey made it a point to be even more assiduous in his daily work than before, so mindful was he of the lofty duties of his calling.

Mary was seated, as usual, by the window, when Mr. Massey called to pay his accustomed visit, and she received him with a sweet smile, her eyes at the same time perceptibly brightening.

"And how do you feel to-day, Mary?" said the curate, gently. "I hope the headache you complained of yesterday has gone."

"Yes, thank you, it has, and I feel almost as if I could go out into the woods on this delightful morning. I do so long to get out again, and walk to all my favourite spots, after being shut up in the house so much," said Mary, with a wistful glance out of the window.

"As soon as the doctor tells us you can safely make this exertion, I will take you for a walk, but it will not do to disobey his injunctions."

"Ah! Mr. Massey, if you knew how heavily the hours pass when one is forced to remain a prisoner to the house for such a time as I have been—but I must not murmur, for it is the will of Heaven that I am thus situated."

"Believe me, Mary, that I earnestly pray for the happy hour to come, when you shall

be pronounced sufficiently strong to go about, in the same way that you did before this illness. But you do yourself injustice, when you talk of feeling irksomeness at this long confinement, for the doctor says you are the most unrepining patient he ever had under his care."

"Dr. Farebrother is too kind in what he says of me, for I am afraid I have given him a great deal of trouble. How thankful I ought to be that I am spared all pain, for the infliction is terrible if the body is so tortured by suffering as to prevent the mind from making use of its powers and resources."

"Do you know, Mary, that you have become quite a little philosopher during your illness. You must have made good use of those books I lent you, for I notice that you often quote the sentiments they express, and seem familiar with their arguments. It is, indeed, an invaluable resource to be able to read and enjoy the works of

learned men; but very few girls at your age really care for this class of literature."

"I know nothing about philosophy," said Mary, smiling; "but I am able to draw certain conclusions from what I read, and I like to think over them in my leisure hours. I never can tire of reading the authors whose works you lent me, but I am sure I give you a great deal of trouble in choosing all the books you get."

"Not at all; there is nothing I would not do to lighten the many weary hours you must have to pass, dear Mary, and I ask no greater reward than one of your smiles, and the gentle pressure of the hand, which speaks so eloquently to the heart," replied the enamoured curate.

"Indeed, you are easily satisfied, Mr. Massey," said Mary; "but rest assured that I shall never forget all your kindness. During so long an illness as mine, I have had time to think over all the numerous acts of goodness which have been bestowed upon

me, for I am afraid when I am well and strong that all this is forgotten."

"No, Mary, I will not allow you to say this, because I believe that you never forget those acts of kindness of which you speak. In my own case there is too much selfishness, I fear, mixed up with the motives by which I am actuated, for you know it is the earnest desire of my heart to prove how deep is the love I bear towards you. Ah! when shall I hear the one little word from your lips which is to crown my hopes with joy?"

Mary sighed, and cast her eyes down at these ardent expressions from her lover, and her mind was agitated with conflicting emotions. It was impossible not to admit the many noble qualities which Mr. Massey proved that he possessed, and his address and entire bearing were well calculated to set off the former to the utmost advantage. His was a character that grew upon you at every successive meeting, while the steadfast

devotion he displayed was in striking contrast to the seeming heartlessness of conduct on the part of the man for whom she yet pined in secret.

"But, Mr. Massey, why do you not look for a partner in life among those who have wealth, worldly standing, and a position, in the eyes of men, more befitting the exalted profession to which you belong, than that of an obscure cottage maiden like me? I cannot consent to deprive you of the advantage which a marriage with a lady in your own rank of life would insure; besides which, as I have told you, I have not that depth of affection to offer, which should be freely given to one who is so worthy of any woman's truest love," said Mary, gently but firmly.

"Dear, generous girl," replied the curate, with increasing vehemence of manner, "when will you cease to think only of others, and to take no heed of your own happiness? You ask why I do not select

one of the fashionable daughters of some county magnate to be the wife of a poor curate, who has only the devotion of a loving heart to offer. Happy are you that you are so ignorant of all worldly schemes and selfishness; but I would not be guilty of such an act of presumption as to aspire to the hand of one so far above me in the world's estimation. But the reason why I have fixed my hopes of happiness upon gaining your heart is, that I find in you a beauty of disposition, an innate purity of character, and a fervent spirit of religion, for which I might look in vain among the highly born ladies of whom you speak."

Mary could not help sighing when she thought of the wealth of that love which was now so freely offered to her, and almost relented from the determination she had formed to reject the curate's suit for ever.

"You rate my poor qualities far too highly, dear Mr. Massey," she said; "but I

feel sure that you will some day meet with one who will return the depth of love of which I am not worthy. Besides which," she added, with tremulous tones, "how cruel would it be to deceive you about my health, when I solemnly believe that I cannot live another year."

"Oh! do not make me wretched, Mary, with these dreadful forebodings, when the doctor himself seems to think you are improving daily. Really, you are looking very much better; and considering the natural strength of your constitution, we have every reason to hope for the best."

"Well, I pray God that it may be so; but it is far better to be prepared for the worst, as I am. But I shall not make those about me unhappy, by dwelling upon such a sad subject; although it is proper that, in the solitude of my chamber, I should often have it before me. Can you not see, however, that I mean to point out how much worse it would be to endure the death

of a wife than that of a mere friend?" said Mary, sadly.

"I understand the delicacy of your motives, my own Mary, but I shall still hope on. As the summer lengthens, and the days grow warmer, you will be able to get out of doors, and, with a return of strength, these gloomy forebodings may pass away. Let me entreat you not to dwell too much upon this unhappy subject, for that in itself is sufficient to prolong your illness. You will think over what I have said, will you, dearest?" said Mr. Massey, tenderly, and with an appealing glance into Mary's eyes.

"You may be sure that you are very often in my thoughts, Mr. Massey," said Mary, warmly; "and do call here whenever you like; only I fear I sometimes prevent you from attending to other and more necessary duties."

"Not in the least, for in general, I only come here after the labour of the day is over,

although this morning I called rather earlier than usual. I have not seen your good aunt yet, but I have nothing particular to say to her."

"Well, you can keep what you have to tell her till to-morrow evening, when we hope that you will be able to come to tea, if you have no better engagement," said Mary.

"I shall be delighted," replied the curate, joyfully; "and remember that I expect now to see the roses deepen upon your cheeks every day."

Mary smiled sadly, but did not say anything; and Mr. Massey presently rose and left the cottage. When he was gone, she had time to reflect upon all that had passed between them, and the more she thought over the disinterested affection her lover displayed, the more she was disposed to look favourably upon his suit. Certainly here was an instance of romantic attachment, untinged by any of the baser passions which

sometimes assume the garb of love, and a life of happiness seemed to be within her grasp. There appeared to be not the faintest probability of Milroy returning to claim his promised bride, but still his image remained firmly engraven on her heart; and often she recalled all the impassioned words he would utter as he clasped her to his bosom. It might be possible to give her hand in marriage to Mr. Massey, but it was certain that all love was dead within her, and she could only reward his devotion with feelings of heartfelt esteem. However, she resolved to consult with her aunt what was the best course to pursue, and to be guided by her mature experience and sound advice.

CHAPTER IX.

Next morning, after breakfast, Mary took an opportunity of speaking to her relative upon the subject which lay so near her heart.

"You know Mr. Massey is coming to tea to-night, aunt?" she commenced, by way of preface.

"Yes, to be sure; so he is. I must remember to get some cake in from the baker, and an extra quantity of cream. We will look out the best tea set, too, for I should like to see the table nicely laid out."

"And some flowers from the garden; we must not forget them, because Mr. Massey is so fond of flowers," said Mary.

"Well, I am sure he deserves plenty of them, considering the beautiful nosegays he often brings you. Where he gets them I don't know, unless it be at the squire's; and maybe the gardener wouldn't be very well pleased if he thought that the fine nosegay he puts up with such pains was to come to us."

"Mr. Massey is such a favourite that no one would grudge him a nosegay as often as he wished it," said Mary. "He was here for some time yesterday, but you did not return before he left."

"I wonder you can see him so often, Mary, and yet still refuse to encourage his suit. I really feel for the young man coming every day, only to go away with as little hope as before."

"He spoke to me again yesterday upon the subject of our marriage," said Mary, with heightening colour; "and I wanted to ask you what I had better do."

"Well, if you take my advice, Mary, you

will tell him that you have thought over the matter, and made up your mind to accept him for a husband. You need not put it in quite so many words, for I have not the least doubt but that he will soon comprehend your meaning."

"But then, what becomes of my plighted word to Mr. Milroy?" urged Mary.

"Stuff and nonsense! plighted word, indeed! A pretty fellow that, to go whining and pining after — a ne'er-do-well scamp, that amused himself while he was idling his time in the country by making love to every girl he came across. Don't mention his name again, my dear; it makes me angry to think of the worthless wretch!"

"Come, aunt, you mustn't speak so unkindly of poor Edward, for you may remember that, at one time, he was a favourite of yours. You know he had no friends or relatives, and, for all we can tell, he may be dead," said Mary, gently, while the tears gathered in her eyes.

"Yes, Mary; you are right," replied Mrs. Forester. "I spoke rather hastily of Milroy, for I certainly never could find fault with his conduct, so far as mere manners and conversation were concerned. Of course, if any accident has happened to him the whole case would be altered; but I cannot help thinking that it looked suspicious his leaving his lodgings so mysteriously, and disappearing no one knows whither. But, after all, you had no real engagement to bind you to him; our few friends about the village were never told about it; and the whole affair was so sudden that I believe you never seriously thought of marrying Milroy."

"Ah! dear aunt, but I did, and looked forward to our marriage as the great event of my life. If you only knew all the bitter tears I have shed when thinking over my lost hopes, you would then see whether I was in earnest or not," said Mary, sadly.

"I knew what an affectionate, good heart you have, my child; but come," said Mrs. Forester, soothingly, "we must not dwell upon that unhappy subject. As Mr. Massey's wife you would, of course, not allow yourself to mourn over any romantic attachment you may have felt for another; and the entire change of life and duties would have the best possible effect on your spirits. Besides, the doctor to whom you owe so much, thinks that you should marry Mr. Massey; and you know what a high opinion you have of his judgment."

"Dr. Farebrother has indeed been most kind and attentive to me," said Mary, "and I owe much to his skill; but, really, I feel so weak and ill at times, that I cannot help being most unwilling to become a clergyman's wife, a person from whom so much is expected. What pleasure will it be to Mr. Massey to have to nurse his bride, and he, too, a delicate man himself?"

"Now, Mary, you must not give way to these unnecessary fears about your health. I declare that you look ever so much better to-day, and when you have all your little household, and other duties, to occupy your time, those melancholy thoughts you speak of will be driven away. Only think, too, how you and Mr. Massey will be able to talk all about the books you both read; and I am sure you will be delighted to preside over the Sunday-school. But there are numberless joys in a married life, as you will soon find out," urged Mrs. Forester.

"I believe firmly that I could like Mr. Massey above all men, and be very happy as his wife, but he ought to be loved very deeply and truly. He is throwing himself away, too, with all his talent and industry by choosing me, when there are so many girls in a far higher position who would be delighted to marry him."

"But, you silly child, if he does not see

all this, why should you wish to call his attention to it? Besides, he is a sensible man, and very likely would be miserable if he always had to remember that he owed any future advancement and prosperity to his wife's fortune and high connexions. He is, no doubt, proud too, and would fear being reproached by the woman he married, if she was sufficiently ill-natured and bad-hearted for this, that he was partly dependent upon her. As for merely liking him, as you say, there is no fear but that you will love him before very long," said Mrs. Forester.

"I am half inclined to accept him, if it were only because I should really like to see him happy," said Mary, musingly.

"Now, Mary, you begin to talk reasonably," exclaimed her aunt, with brightening countenance; "only always keep of this mind, and we shall soon see you as well as ever. Mr. Massey is sure to take an early

opportunity of talking to you again on the subject, and everything will go on all right."

With these words she left the room, and Mary was once more alone. She felt that it would be a great relief to her mind, when the question was definitely settled one way or another, for with her sweet and yielding disposition, it pained her to act contrary to the wishes of those who were so anxiously concerned for her welfare. In short, it could easily be seen that Mr. Massey had only to persevere a little longer, and his ardent wishes would be successfully carried out.

* * * *

Punctually at the hour appointed the curate came to fulfil his engagement, and was warmly welcomed by Mary and her aunt. Nothing could be more tastefully arranged than the tea-table, and good Mrs. Forester had spared no exertions to secure the best of everything the village could furnish. The pretty white tea-service, with

its bordering of light blue, was set out on the snowy table-cloth by Mary's own hands; a vase of carefully-selected flowers occupied the centre of the table, round which were ranged various dishes holding sweet cake, bread, preserves, and butter of a marvellous purity of colour. Mrs. Forester was an admirable hand at making those delicious round flour cakes which are justly the pride of an English tea-table, and they peered temptingly out from the folds of a white napkin; and, above all, the deliciously rich cream, which hung about the sides of the cream-jug in thick flakes of foam, would have tempted the most bigoted advocate of tea *au naturel* to break through his rule.

"This tea is really very refreshing after the walk I have had to-day," said Mr. Massey, as he handed his cup to be refilled by Mary.

"I always think that there is nothing restores one like a good cup of tea," replied

Mrs. Forester. "In my opinion, when a person is wearied or wet through, it sets them up, much better than the best of wine or spirits."

"Such a beverage as that I have just tasted, is indeed a cordial," said the curate; "and I think I must get your receipt for making it. My good landlady assures me that no one can surpass her in the matter of tea-making, and would be horrified if I called in question her supremacy in the art, so I must be careful what I say beyond these walls."

"I cannot boast of any great skill or mystery," said Mrs. Forester. "Boiling water, plenty of tea, and a grain of soda complete the mixture, but a great deal depends upon whether you put cream or milk in the cup. You gentlemen, who sit up so late at night reading and studying, take very strong tea to keep you from sleeping, but it is very trying for the nerves."

"Well, I am afraid I have got into rather bad habits in this respect," replied Mr. Massey, laughing, "but living alone in lodgings is a bad training-school for young men, so far as regards order and regularity in hours, meals, and domestic economy."

"But there is great excuse for a bachelor who is hard worked every day of the week giving way to a little irregularity of this sort," said Mrs. Forester, with a glance at Mary, who sat, with a slight smile upon her lips, listening to the dialogue between her aunt and Mr. Massey.

"One is certainly apt to get into certain fixed ways, which it is difficult to alter should the one great and happy change take place," said Mr. Massey, with an involuntary but fond look at Mary, who cast down her eyes and blushed faintly. "I have a theory of my own, however, although it is open to much debate, that it matters little at what time you take your rest pro-

vided you get a reasonable quantity, sufficient to recruit nature. I know that in this I run counter to the time-honoured maxim, that an hour of sleep before midnight is worth two after, but even this respected saying I am prepared to controvert."

"I am not fit to argue with you," said Mrs. Forester, dubiously shaking her head, "but you may depend on it that you will find out your mistake before you have lived many years longer. I thank God that I have, upon the whole, enjoyed good health, and I put it down greatly to keeping early hours and living systematically."

In conversation such as this the evening meal passed, and the servant came to clear away the tea things. Mary joined but little in the talk between her aunt and Mr. Massey, for she seemed unusually pensive and silent. The truth was that her thoughts were a good deal occupied with the arguments and entreaties Mrs. Forester had, that morning,

employed to influence her niece to accept Mr. Massey as a husband. When she looked at him, and marked the fine, frank expression which his countenance wore, and heard the gentle, winning accents of his voice, while, at the same time, she recalled to mind the unaffected goodness of his heart, she owned that her lot might be a very happy one. At this juncture the servant informed Mrs. Forester that a sister of Farmer Redgrave's, who was a particular friend of the former, wished to see her, so that Mary and Mr. Massey once more found themselves alone.

There was an easily perceptible degree of agitation and nervousness in Mr. Massey's manner, but Mary herself was similarly moved, which prevented her from noticing her companion's rather unusual perturbation. And yet she was almost prepared for any declaration from him, for, whenever he looked at her, there was an unmistakeable expression in his eyes which told, with

mute eloquence, how she was beloved. The curate, on his part, was overjoyed that he had another opportunity of urging his suit, because he fancied that he could see symptoms favourable to his hopes.

"You are very quiet to-night, Mary," began Mr. Massey, not knowing very well what to say.

"Aunt and you have been having such an interesting discussion, that I sat by listening and improving my mind," said Mary, with a quiet smile.

"Your aunt is a very sensible woman, and no one ever heard her say an ill-natured word of any human being," observed Mr. Massey.

Mary thought that he might partially have altered his opinion if he knew how she had mentioned poor Milroy's conduct, although in justice to her respected relative it must be owned that there was some ground for the severity of her remarks.

"My aunt, you see, was very carefully

and prudently brought up, and she has done her best to make me benefit by her experience."

"Ah! dear Mary, we all stand in need of such good friends and counsellors. I trust she may be long spared to you, for, when you are left alone in the world, you will doubly feel the want of so true a guardian."

Mary heaved a sigh at these words, and looked down. Something in her demeanour now prompted Mr. Massey to renew again his tender solicitations, and drawing closer to her he once more told his soft tale.

"Do I pain you, sweetest, by again recurring to my fond feelings of love, for it is useless to conceal the pangs which now agitate my breast. When I am near you there is but one chord which vibrates ever within me, and it is idle to deny that I cannot still its throbbing. Only tell me, dearest, that I may still hope on, although you will not consent to our union just yet. Only con-

sider how dreary will be my lot, if I am forced to dream on about imaginary joys of which I may never partake—to pine for a companionship I may never share—to chase a lovely phantom which ever eludes my grasp. Reverse the picture, and behold me proud and happy as the husband of a trusting and adored wife, whose beautiful smile lights up the shadows of my home—whose gentle spirit brings dew from heaven to refresh the weary or faint of heart—whose footfall sounds in my ear like the tread of an angel. You must not withhold such happiness from me, dearest Mary," said Mr. Massey, as his words grew more eloquent and impassioned, and, at the same time, he pressed her hand firmly with his own; "I think if you ask your heart, it will warn you from driving to desolation and despair one whose fate lies in your power."

Oh! the unutterable thrill of delight which coursed through Massey's veins as he felt a very faint pressure of the small hand

within his own, and her head, which at first had been slightly averted, now confidingly laid against his breast. It was a feeling of ecstatic joy, such as is only once experienced in a lifetime, and before which the most glowing and voluptuous pleasures of the senses pale into insignificance. He imprinted one chaste kiss upon her lips, and looked down wistfully and fondly upon the girl whom he now could call his own. Neither spoke for a time, and Mr. Massey seemed as though he never could gaze enough upon the blushing face that nestled so near his heart. There needed no words to be spoken by Mary to tell her lover that, at last, his constancy was rewarded — the little pressure was all sufficient.

"My own Mary! for now you are indeed my own darling bride," said Mr. Massey, at last, "I now indeed know what a delicious feeling love is. Now shall I bask in perpetual sunshine, and, like the cuckoo, I shall

know 'no sorrow in my song, no winter in my year.'"

"How poetical you have been, Wilfred," answered Mary, with a smile; "I never noticed it so much before."

"You see what power you have, sweetest; what a bewitching little magician you are; how you can transform a matter-of-fact clergyman into a poet, by your touch. And to think that you will always be mine, and that we are never more to be separated, but that the same roof shall shelter us, the same sunbeam be reflected in our eyes! I can hardly believe in my good fortune, only that the sweet form by my side is a silent proof that all is true," said Mr. Massey, in joyous, excited tones.

"You must not be quite so extravagant in your expressions, Wilfred dear, because if you begin this way I am afraid you will exhaust all your beautiful and poetical ideas. But I am delighted that you should feel all this, and can indeed say that

I will do my utmost to make you always as happy as you are now," said Mary, simply but earnestly.

In the excitement of the moment all her former glowing beauty of countenance had once more mantled over Mary's features, and no one could have distinguished the blight that threatened to waste away this young and innocent form. She was pleased to be able to contribute so much to Mr. Massey's happiness, and, in her heart, she prayed that Heaven might permit her to live and be a blessing to her husband's home.

In the midst of this joyous emotion Mrs. Forester re-entered the room, and at once, to her great delight, saw that something favourable had been communicated to Mr. Massey. He resolved to lose no time in announcing how great and unexpected a change had come over his prospects. Rising up and taking Mary's hand, while with the other he pointed towards her, he said in

tones which were slightly tremulous with excitement. "Allow me to introduce you to my bride, Mrs. Forester, and do you not give me joy for my rare fortune in securing such a beautiful one?"

Mary hung down her head a little, with charming modesty of expression; and so delighted was her aunt that she kissed her niece affectionately on both cheeks.

"I give you both joy," said Mrs. Forester, "for I think that two persons who are exactly suited to each other are now brought together, and I hope that it may please God long to spare you to be of mutual comfort and help to one another. Why, Mary, you look a year younger since I left the room, and you have got quite a glow of health now!"

Mary smiled, but did not say anything, and indeed Mr. Massey gave her no time, for it appeared as though he could not restrain his joyful exclamations.

"That is what I say, Mrs. Forester. She looks quite another person now, from

the pale, drooping girl who has given us so much anxiety. But we shall soon see her flitting about like a little dear, sweet, fairy as she is, among her flowers in the garden, and perhaps she will give me a bouquet made up by her pretty delicate fingers," exclaimed Mr. Massey, looking proudly at Mary.

"Well, I will, but only if you promise to be very good and do all that I tell you," said Mary, archly. "In the first place I must insist upon your giving up reading so late at night as you do, and you must not be walking ten miles to the very end of the parish on a wet day, merely because you think Mrs. Cotswold would be offended if you did not call to inquire how her rheumatism was."

"Ah, Mary, I see you don't forget what I occasionally let slip. But, to tell the truth, Farmer Cotswold has been a very good friend to me, and the rain only commenced that day when I had got half way, and I

thought it scarcely worth while to turn back," replied Mr. Massey.

And so the evening passed, until the curate had reluctantly to take his departure. It seemed as though he could not tear himself away from Mary's presence, and she too felt very happy to have him near her. But, although she did not permit herself to dwell upon the subject, it was impossible for her to help contrasting the state of her feelings now, with what they were after she heard and returned Milroy's declaration of love. Now, indeed, she experienced a tranquil sense of placid content, and acknowledged that her union with Mr. Massey might be attended with all the happiness she was capable of feeling. Far different this, from the delirious and maddening outburst of joy when she pledged her heart and soul to her first, and only true, love. But the retrospect was painful, and any indulgence in it was positively wicked in the circumstances in which she now was; so

Mary rigidly set her mind to forget the past. Quite enough was it now, to reflect that the happiness and well-being of a most estimable man were entrusted to her keeping, and she cheerfully strove to prove that the confidence reposed in her was not misplaced.

CHAPTER X.

We must now return to the doings of a personage of whom we have lost sight for some time, namely, Edward Milroy. From the letter of Doctor Farebrother it will have been gathered that he survived the fearful drop into the waves from the turrets of the old ruined castle. Thanks to his having, while yet a mere child, been carefully taught how to dive and swim, he was enabled to strike out for the shore and scramble on to the rocks, soon after the first shock of his sudden immersion was over. Although the height from which he dropped down was very formidable, the position in which he placed himself caused him to cut through the water like a leaden weight, and, though

a good deal stunned by the force with which he struck the surface, he soon recovered consciousness. Passing along the strand at the foot of the castle rocks, he took an unfrequented path which led near the sea-beach to a small fishing village, situated at a considerable distance along the shore from the one in which Mary Forester and her aunt lived. The rapid motion of walking and running alternately soon dried his clothes, and when he had placed some miles between himself and the old castle, he lay down on some dry sand beneath the shelter of a rock, and fell into a sound slumber. When he awoke it was broad daylight, the sun being already high above the horizon, so he pursued his way towards the village of which we have spoken. First, however, he took the precaution of arranging his somewhat soiled and disordered clothes, and made shift with his pocket-handkerchief to form a sort of covering for his head from the rays of the sun. His hat had been lost

while he struggled in the waves, and all he could do was to wait till he had an opportunity of purchasing another. This was a matter of little difficulty as soon as he reached the village, and Milroy next proceeded to the small hostel which afforded to weary passers-by the means of slaking their thirst, and satisfying their hunger. Although the "White Deer" was but an humble edifice, still it boasted of a clean bar, where several sturdy labourers in rough fustian jackets, great hob-nailed boots, straw hats, and the other appurtenances indicative of their connexion with the cultivation of the soil, had congregated to enjoy their morning draught of ale. Passing by them, Milroy informed the landlord, who emerged from the recesses of the bar, that he intended to take up his quarters with him for the space of a week at least, and was civilly received by the rustic boniface. In reply to a significant glance at the stranger, who carried no carpet-bag or other article to indicate

that he was in possession of any additional wardrobe save what he carried on his back, Milroy remarked that he expected his portmanteau would be brought on by a carrier's cart later that afternoon, or early to-morrow. This arranged, he sat down in the public room, and did ample justice to a very substantial breakfast which was shortly placed before him.

Before Milroy made the excursion to the village of H——, which resulted in his meeting with Mary Forester, he passed some days in a town of considerable size at the borders of the county, and left his travelling portmanteau at the hotel where he put up. Not intending to remain away more than a short time, he only took with him a light bag with some necessaries in it, and these were now at the lodgings he occupied in H——. For reasons of his own, he did not wish to return there, but preferred that his landlady should remain in ignorance of his whereabouts; so he left the "White Deer" soon after breakfast, and walked on to another village some

two or three miles distant. Here he hired a post-chaise at the principal inn, and at once drove to the town before mentioned, and, going to the hotel, claimed and got possession of his portmanteau. Having ascertained that a carrier's cart passed through the village of Portwaltham, he placed the portmanteau, duly addressed to himself at the "White Deer," under the charge of the proprietor, and returned in the post-chaise, arriving at his destination by nightfall.

During the next few days, Milroy passed a considerable portion of his time in writing, only going out for a walk when the shades of evening drew in. He had reasons of his own for not wishing to be much seen abroad, but one night he told the landlord that it might be late before he got back, and that he was unwilling to disturb the household by returning after midnight. His good-natured host, however, assured him that he did not mind sitting up, as he could always

take a comfortable sleep in his old leather stuffed arm-chair; and there he was, sure enough, when Milroy returned at an early hour in the morning.

It must not be supposed that the presence of the gentlemanly and good-looking young stranger failed to occasion some curiosity in the minds of the village gossips. There was just sufficient mystery in his movements to raise a little wonder in their minds, but as the stranger was not communicative their curiosity was not gratified. He studiously avoided getting into conversation with any of the idlers, who hung about the bar of the "White Deer," of an evening after the labour of the day was passed, and civilly parried those remarks of his worthy host which savoured too strongly of the nature of interrogatories. Mine host of the "Deer" gave his lodger a high character for liberality, and punctuality in paying his bill, and it was quite clear that he was possessed of very comfortable resources.

Meanwhile, we may be sure that Mary Forester occupied much of Milroy's thoughts, and bitterly did he reproach himself with the whole course of his conduct towards her.

"What evil fortune ever brought us together?" he would say to himself. "I should have remembered the gulf that lay between us, and not played with that gentle spirit and betrayed that loving heart. It is too late now to repair all the mischief that has been wrought, and I can do nothing but leave her to the supposition either that I have proved faithless, or that some accident has befallen me. Poor loving heart!—I fear that my base conduct will cause it to break, while I, the destroyer, move on my way unharmed. I can quit the country, and seek, in the distractions of travel and foreign scenes, relief from stinging tortures of remorse; but she, poor girl! must linger on, with the wound ever fresh in her memory. Well, let me hope that I

may be forgotten, and that she may soon meet with one more fitting the love of so sweet and true a heart. I am unworthy of so rare a prize."

But no sophistry or argument could disguise from Milroy the great injury he had done to Mary Forester, and he tried to dismiss the subject from his thoughts without success. After remaining about three weeks at the village of Portwaltham, he announced to the landlord of the "White Deer" that he intended to take his departure next day, a communication which was received with every demonstration of regret. Mine host hoped the gentleman had been comfortable, and that he always had proper attendance; and was there any chance of his coming back, because the best room in the house should be kept vacant for him, and he hoped the country-folk drinking at the bar did not disturb him of an evening. To these, and similar anxious queries, Milroy civilly replied that everything was quite to

his mind, and that if he came to this part of the country again, he would certainly patronize the "White Deer."

On the day indicated Milroy left the inn as quietly as he came to it, and earned the everlasting gratitude of the buxom maid-of-all-work by presenting her with a sovereign. This amazing act of liberality was handed down as a tradition from each succeeding barmaid to the other, and will doubtless be for generations to come.

CHAPTER XI.

It is not our purpose to follow the wanderings of Edward Milroy, for a record of his movements would not advance the purport of the story. We will now, therefore, again present him to the reader as he walks along a green lane in one of the Midland counties on a breezy May morning. He bore in his hand a stout oaken staff, and the dust on his boots indicated that he had already travelled a considerable distance. The country through which he walked was richly wooded in many places; and a winding stream of no great breadth, but remarkable clearness, gave increased beauty to the landscape. For some considerable distance, the road passed through the lands of Del-

maine Court, a beautiful seat belonging to Aubrey De Vaux, and the mansion-house was visible, embosomed in surrounding woods and verdure. Milroy paused on his way to survey the variegated expanse of lawn, park, and plantation, here presented to his gaze, and he seemed to look at the scene with peculiar interest. The mansion-house was an extensive pile of building, of mixed styles of architecture, and stood on an eminence, commanding fine views of the pleasure-grounds and country beyond.

After gazing at the view for some time, Milroy proceeded on his way, until the road opened out on to a common, of no great extent, covered with short grass, and, here and there, patches of furze. The sun had been shining all the morning, and Milroy visibly felt its power, in addition to which he was very thirsty. Looking round for a roadside inn at which he might obtain some refreshment, he could see no habitation, except one small cottage which was

placed at the extreme corner of the common. Thinking, at any rate, that he should get a glass of water from its inmates, Milroy directed his steps to the lonely cottage, which might be distant about a quarter of a mile. When he came to the door he looked for some signs of its inmates, but no one was visible. There was an air of desolation, too, about the small uncultivated garden, with its grass-grown walks and straggling fence, through which gaps had been made in various places. Everything was silent, and no trace of either fowl or animal was to be seen. Milroy knocked at the door, at first gently, but, as no response was elicited, repeated his knock more loudly. Still no one answered, and it appeared as though the cottage was deserted, only a thin column of smoke, which rose from the chimney, showed that it must have some inmates. Going to the window, Milroy looked into the single room of which the cottage consisted, and saw that there was, at any rate,

one occupant—a woman, who sat on an old arm-chair near the smouldering fire. By her attitude she seemed to be asleep, and Milroy now proceeded to try if the door was fastened, in order that he might effect an entrance. The door was merely on the latch, and, softly opening it, he stepped into the middle of the room. The noise of his footstep on the wooden floor had the effect of awakening the sleeper, who at once started up and looked with surprise at Milroy, while he hastened to explain what he wanted.

"My good woman!" said he, "you must excuse my disturbing you, but I am very thirsty, and took the liberty of entering to ask for a glass of water."

"Hush!" replied the woman, pointing to a bedstead at one side of the room, which seemed to be occupied by some one, "or you will wake her."

Milroy now saw that the woman who addressed him was apparently about sixty

years old, and her coarse attire and homely features indicated that she moved in the humblest ranks of life. Little could be seen of her who lay on the bed, as the curtains were partially drawn, but from the low and regular breathing it was evident that she slept. The furniture of the cottage was of the poorest possible description, consisting, besides the bed, of an old mahogany table, two or three rickety-looking chairs, a cheap German clock, which ticked away with great liveliness in the corner, and some plates and dishes of common delf ware glistened on the shelves.

"I hope I have not disturbed you," said Milroy, in reply to the woman's admonition of silence.

"No harm is done, sir, only——"

Here she was interrupted by the sleeper suddenly waking up and thrusting her face out from between the curtains. Apparently she must have been disturbed by the unusual sound of strange voices, or Milroy's

tread may have struck on her ear, but there she was, gazing upon them with a wild, excited stare.

"Now, lie down, darlin', and go to sleep," said Grace Coombes, for such was the name of the woman whom Milroy first spoke to. But the person thus addressed would not be coaxed so easily, and continued to gaze upon Milroy with the same fixed and unquiet air. In appearance she might be judged to be somewhere about forty years of age, and her features were regular and even handsome. Her dark hair escaped from the ribbon which fastened it in a knot, and fell down over her night-dress. From the expression of her wild gleaming eye, it seemed almost as if reason was gone; and the thin wan face told plainly its tale of suffering and woe.

"Lie down again, there's a dear!" urged Grace in a soothing tone, while Milroy gazed upon the strange scene with interest.

"No, I will not lie down at your or any one's bidding," replied the sufferer in a determined tone, and with a deep voice whose accents seemed to startle Milroy as though they were familiar to his ears. "I want to speak to that man; he shall listen to me."

"Oh! dear, dear! what am I to do?" said Grace Coombes in a troubled tone; "I shall never get her quieted again."

"Woman—leave us alone, I tell you!" exclaimed the other in an imperious tone; "I have something to say to this man which no one shall hear but himself. The Lord has sent him here, in order that I may die in peace, and unburden my conscience of what hangs heavy on it."

Grace now tried to draw Milroy away towards the door, whispering at the same time, "Only get outside, sir, and I will try and quiet her. You see, poor body! she is very ill of a brain fever, and the doctor says she will never get over it. Her husband

died in foreign parts, and she has not been home long; but, as she was born and bred hereabouts, she came back again to try and get a living."

Here she was interrupted by the sick woman rising out of her bed, and Grace turned back just as the other had thrown all the bedclothes off. Milroy, whose curiosity was now thoroughly aroused, thought it better to interpose and prevent the mischief which would probably occur if the patient quitted her couch.

"Keep quiet, my good woman," said he, addressing the latter, "and I will hear what you have got to say; only you must lie down, and not expose yourself to the air, or the doctor will be very angry. Now, come, tell me what it is."

"Not until we are alone," replied the sick woman. "Tell Grace Coombes to leave us first."

Milroy now requested the latter to quit the cottage for a little, and assured her that

he would take care that her patient should come to no harm. Under these circumstances Grace acquiesced, and quitted the cottage, closing the door after her. When she was gone, Milroy drew a chair up to the woman's bedside, and she then began her communication.

"Aubrey De Vaux," she said, "I knew you at once, although many years have passed since I nursed you."

Milroy started at hearing himself addressed by this name, but said nothing, and the woman proceeded.

"Aye, I daresay you have forgotten Susan Helps, the gamekeeper's daughter, who you were once so fond of; but no matter, she is forgotten by every one now—curses on them all! Well, well, what do I care? If they let me only die in peace, they may come and dance a jig over my grave, and welcome; but I am wandering. Let me see, where was I?"

During the time she uttered these ram-

bling words, Susan had firm hold of Milroy's hand, and closely scanned his countenance as she proceeded. He, willing to humour her, made no remark, but suffered her to take her own way.

"Well, you are little changed, Aubrey De Vaux, and I hope your heart is in the right place. A fine time of it you must have, with your grand estates and your great friends, and I suppose all the women love you, too. Are you married yet? But stop; they told me you are not, and quite right, too. Why should you marry? Love them all if you like, but don't wed, don't wed. Take example by your father. What did he get by his marriage, aye, and what did I get by it?" she exclaimed, with a bitter, grating laugh.

Milroy sought to keep her to the subject by talking of marriage, and speaking in soft, soothing tones.

"Thank you, Susan, for the advice; but it is not needed, fortunately, for I am not

married yet. There is plenty of time before me; I am still quite young."

"Right, right; don't you marry if you want love. No, no; win all the girls' hearts, as I am sure you do, and break them if you like, for this has always been the custom of your family since ever I knew them," was the woman's reply.

"Did you not say that you wished to communicate something to me?" urged Milroy, as Susan kept still wandering from the subject.

"Aye, that I do, something of the deepest importance to you; but come near," she said, grasping Milroy's arm, and drawing him close to her. Susan spoke in a hushed tone, as though she feared that their colloquy might be overheard by Grace Coombes.

"You are too young to remember," she went on to say, "what took place one night, about twenty years ago, in the old library of Delmaine Court."

Milroy shook his head, and Susan continued—

"Never mind, it does not much matter, for you will certainly find out before long, and I shall be able to die with the thought to console me that I did the best to make up for the sin and injustice I had helped to carry out; and yet I don't want to die, I am not old enough nearly, and can still enjoy life as much as the best of you; but alas! the doctor looks at me in a way that makes my warm blood run cold in my veins. Stop, stop; even now I feel myself getting very faint," she said, suffering her head to fall back upon the pillow, and closing her eyes, which but a moment before had been glistening with excitement. Milroy feared that she was going to become insensible all at once, without having disclosed anything intelligible; however, Susan, after a little time, suddenly seemed to recover herself, and, once more opening

her eyes, said in a deep whisper, with quick, eager utterance—

"You must make haste and go to Delmaine Court, and first look in the library—the room I mean with the double bow window, from which you see over the lake—for an old family Bible, with big brass clasps. Stop, I am talking nonsense, as if it was likely that your father would leave such a book out for strangers to get hold of. No, no; you must open the little oak door close to the window, you know, and inside that dark closet the book will be found. There is a small square panel, right opposite the door, about the height of a man's head from the floor, which opens when you press hard upon a little mark near the top, exactly like a knot in the wood. Now, unless it has been opened by some one who knows the secret—and I don't think anybody, except myself, does know it—there you will get the book. Unfasten the clasps, and you will find an entry, in your father's hand-

writing, on a blank leaf, which deeply concerns you; besides which, there ought to be a little thin packet of paper, tied round with a silk thread, that is of priceless value to you. Look between the leaves for this paper; but you must swear to make a right use of it," said Susan, looking sternly and searchingly into Milroy's eyes; "and stay," she continued, "here is a letter I have been keeping for you a long time, which will tell you fully about it all."

With these words she slipped into his hand a letter, in an old dirty envelope, addressed to "Aubrey De Vaux, Esq.," which she took from a small bag that lay below her pillow.

"I do, indeed, promise this," answered Milroy. "Never fear but that I will act as my conscience tells me I ought."

"I believe you, Aubrey. Come nearer to me, my dear. Don't you know your old nurse? Why, many and many a time I have carried you in my arms,"

said Susan, as she drew Milroy towards her.

She seemed growing weaker, for her voice was thin and husky, while she lay back on the pillow as if exhausted by the effort of speaking so much.

"I am sure you were a good, kind nurse to me, Susan," said Milroy, soothingly; "and I hope to prove my gratitude some day. But, do you know, it is strange that I have not the faintest recollection of my childish days; and my father's face too, I cannot remember a single feature of."

"No, my poor boy, I don't wonder at that. But don't think of him, he was a terrible man. Who would have thought we should have met in this way? And you will occasionally remember your nurse after she is dead, will you?" said Susan, as the tears at last forced themselves from her eyes.

Milroy was touched at the poor woman's

sorrow, and strove to calm her agitation.

"Don't despair, Susan, the doctor will bring you round yet; but I am afraid you must be tired with all this talking. Now, wont you try to get some sleep; and I will call the woman who is attending to you?" said Milroy, going to the window and beckoning Grace Coombes to enter.

"Will you give poor Susan one kiss, just for the memory of old times, when you used to throw your little arms about my neck for me to carry you?"

Milroy stooped and pressed his lips to her forehead; and a smile came over her lips as she lay, with closed eyes, back on the pillow.

"Good-bye, Susan," he said, "for the present. I will come again and see you before very long."

With these words he left the cottage, after first giving Grace two sovereigns, directing her to purchase some wine, to

strengthen the slight nourishment Susan was able to take. What he had just heard from her made a great impression upon him, and, as he walked on, he mused long upon her singular words.

"Can it be," he thought to himself, "that I am about at last to find out the dim, mysterious secret which seems to hang over my childish days? Well, a very little time will determine it now; but I must get possession of that packet she spoke of in the first place. How is this to be done, though, for everything will be spoilt if I am seen just at present? Let me see, now, I think I can hit upon a plan which will do, only it must be set about at once, and the sooner the better."

Milroy now retraced his steps back to the high road, before mentioned, which skirted the grounds of Delmaine Court; and when he arrived at the park surrounding the mansion-house, he left the road and clambered over the fence. Keeping close to the

confines of the park, he walked rapidly on until he arrived at a thick plantation of trees, which stretched quite up to the ornamental pleasure-grounds round the house; entering this, he was secure from observation, unless he should chance to encounter one of the keepers, and accordingly moved on with less circumspection. When he reached the borders of the wood, he could overlook the entire ground at the back of the house, which was situated about two or three hundred yards from where he stood. The space behind the mansion was laid out with the greatest taste, and in the midst of a beautiful and smoothly-cut lawn was an ornamental piece of water of some size; round its margin were planted masses of rare shrubs and flowers, and soft gravel walks wound in every direction through the grounds. Various terraces had been formed, on which marble statues were placed, and at each end a richly-carved fountain was erected, which, however, was not playing at present. In every

direction evidences of unbounded wealth and exquisite taste appeared; and though the house seemed unoccupied, everything was kept up in the most finished and perfect style. With the exception of a very few, all the windows were closed, and showed the shutters within; but among those open was the library bow one, before mentioned. This window was but a few feet from the ground, and could easily be reached from below, by any one wishing to enter. Having noted the appearance of everything, Milroy retraced his steps through the plantation, and finally emerged once more upon the high road, where, for the present, we will leave him slowly walking back to the place whence he set out that morning.

CHAPTER XII.

Ida and her father had been living at Delmaine Court for little more than a fortnight, and as they only occupied two or three rooms, all the other apartments in the house were shut up. Here had been passed some of the happiest days of Ida's life, and she selected this place to reside at during the summer, until something should be decided as to their future plans. Absence from Aubrey De Vaux had only increased all those feelings which had already cost her such struggles and unhappiness; but still she resolved to avoid, as much as lay in her power, giving herself up to any morbid indulgence in recollections which only deepened the wound already made. With

this intention, she suppressed as much as possible any recurrence to the subject, and endeavoured, by commencing an extensive series of studies and reading, to divert the current of her thoughts. But there was one matter which often occurred to her, and each time she longed more and more to settle the question at once; and this was the mysterious picture that formed the link between herself, Aubrey, and Mr. De Burgh. In spite of Aubrey's assurance that he loved no one, she still had her own suspicions, which she could not overcome; and if an opportunity offered itself, she certainly intended to have an interview with this unknown girl. Being in possession of the address of the person who took the photograph, and having also noted the number at the back, there would be little difficulty in tracing the original, and finding out all about her. What made Ida's position more painful, was the fact of her having scarcely any hope that an union could ever take

place between herself and De Vaux; yet still, she could hardly relinquish for ever this fondly cherished illusion. All that she could now do was to base her hopes of future happiness upon a life of tranquil enjoyment, either in the companionship of her father, or protected by a husband of good social position. This was at any time within her power to compass, for she saw that, by holding out the slightest encouragement, she could soon bring to her feet several gentlemen, visitors of Aubrey's, in excellent circumstances and worldly standing. But unfortunately for Ida, the fatal passion which she had so long fostered made her despise all overtures from those who certainly were greatly her inferiors in accomplishments and talents; and having set her heart upon De Vaux, as her idol and beau-idéal, she sullenly refused to alter her choice.

The days were passed by Ida and the Baron with little or no variation, one from

the other, and to any one who did not care for country pursuits they would have seemed terribly monotonous. She rose early, and generally read, for an hour before breakfast, either some historical or philosophical work. The morning meal over, she would put on her bonnet for a walk, which was frequently extended from the pleasure-grounds into the woods beyond, and, as she generally carried a small volume of some favourite poet with her, very often she would remain on a rustic seat or soft bank, reading till luncheon time. The Baron liked a drive or ride in the afternoon, and his daughter almost always accompanied him, and after dinner she played or sang to her father, who was very fond of music. The library was at all times a very favourite place of resort with Ida, who loved to range at will among the old volumes, and frequently, after all the household had retired to rest, her candle might be seen shining through the bow window.

This morning she had received a letter from De Vaux—the first since they had parted at St. Petersburgh—dated at Simla, near the Himalayas. The Baron had heard several times from Aubrey, who was a facile and graceful letter-writer, and he appeared to be in excellent spirits, thoroughly enjoying his tour. In his letter to Ida, Aubrey seemed to have exerted himself to convey a vivid picture of the scenes through which he had passed, and there was a peculiar brilliancy and graphic power in his light and picturesque sketches of native manners, costumes, and mode of life. Judging from the tone of the letter, Aubrey must have been unusually cheerful and happy when he wrote it, and there was even a vein of playful and quaint humour in some of his remarks, which seemed almost foreign to his nature. But on a separate sheet of paper, evidently intended for Ida's eyes alone, were a few lines of a very different import, which ran as follows:—

"My own dear Ida,

"I write this gay and trifling letter to you in the hope that it may bring a smile to your lips and amuse a passing hour, but do not think that it is a true index to my state of mind. On the contrary, I am weighed down with a strange foreboding of some great catastrophe which is about to overwhelm me, and this shadow seems always to cross my path. Forget me, Ida, I entreat you; only should I die far away from all who know—I will not say love—me, breathe a prayer for the man whose few happy hours have been passed beside you. Why do I write these lines to add still more perhaps to the sorrow you already feel? It must be the evil demon which sways all my actions that prompts me; but why repine—

'The boast of heraldry, the pride of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Await alike the inevitable hour:
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.'"

These ominous words sunk with withering force into Ida's heart, and completely neutralized the effect of Aubrey's gay and entertaining letter. In the latter he spoke in the most cheerful strain of his future movements, and talked of travelling all through India, from whence he might probably visit Australia and America. Strange contradiction that could impel him to stultify himself by penning two communications of so discordant a nature! There was no further proof needed of the cold and heartless disposition of the man, than this wanton trifling with the feelings of one who had proved the excess of her devotion and love. It completely prostrated poor Ida, who was not yet prepared to dash away the idol she had raised up, even although she might be forced bitterly to own that it was of base and worthless metal. What could he mean by the vague expressions he used, about some misfortune being likely to overtake him? Was it connected with that mys-

terious secret he had spoken of as undermining his peace of mind? Surely he could not be contemplating suicide, or meditating a voluntary exile from his native country. It was impossible; for a man in his position, and with his means, could afford to set public opinion at defiance for any crime short of murder. She never dreamed of this last-mentioned crime as one of which Aubrey De Vaux could be guilty, and spurned the idea with contempt, now that it obtruded itself on her notice.

In short, Ida was utterly at a loss what to believe, and Aubrey's letter now exclusively occupied her thoughts, although she tried to busy herself with other matters. It only proved how firmly her affections were centred on the man, and she bitterly blamed herself for not having withdrawn from his influence years ago.

CHAPTER XIII.

The shades of evening were deepening into the gloom of night, as Milroy again moved with careful footsteps through the woods surrounding Delmaine Court. It was an unusually oppressive night for that season of the year, and the song of the nightingale rang loud and clear through the calm air. The sounds of labour were all hushed, and the lights began to twinkle in the distant cottages, where their humble inhabitants were enjoying the evening meal after the day's labour was over. Milroy approached sufficiently near the mansion-house to see that several of the windows were open, on account of the heat of the night, and, among them, that of the library. Satisfied

with his scrutiny, he withdrew into the recesses of the woods, until it was time for him to engage upon the work which he had to perform.

Throughout all that day Ida had felt agitated and unwell. The mysterious words, so full of sad import, contained in Aubrey's letter, had made a deep impression upon her, and she could not dismiss the subject from her mind. Apparently they were the expressions of a man who was contemplating death, and yet it was not the first time that he had spoken in a similar strain. Was it only to tantalize her still further, that he adopted a tone of despondency, as if absence from her caused this outburst of melancholy foreboding? Now, more than ever, she felt the want of a sympathizing friend in whom to confide her sorrow, for it was out of the question to think of applying to her father for consolation. Although, in her intercourse with the latter, Ida now displayed the greatest duti-

fulness, still she had never learned to look upon him as the gentle, loving friend, ever inviting sympathy, and ready to offer sweet counsel. Pent within her own bosom, Ida's troubles rankled all the more because they were imparted to no one; and so accustomed was she to hide all her griefs, that even her tears seemed to be unable to flow.

In the afternoon she pleaded fatigue and headache, as an excuse for not accompanying her father in his ride. She strolled about the lawns and terrace walks, still pondering over Aubrey's letter, and at each turn something fresh met her gaze, recalling some happy memento of bygone days. Here was a seat where many times, when the evenings were warm, Aubrey and she would sit listening to the liquid notes of the nightingale. She could even recal conversations they had held together while slowly sauntering over the soft green turf, and thought, with a shudder, of the many

thousand miles which now separated them. She even spoke to the old Scotch gardener about him, as she reminded the former that he must be sure to plant a particular sort of flower, which De Vaux was fond of, in time to bloom should he return this autumn. This man was rather a favourite with his master, who rarely took any notice of his servants, although he scrupulously avoided ever using harsh or domineering language to any one beneath him.

"This is a nice afternoon, Andrew," said Ida, as she passed the old man, who was bending over his work.

"Ay, miss, it is sae," answered the latter, standing as erect as he could, considering that the weight of more than seventy years bowed down his once stalwart form.

"I see you are planting some of Mr. De Vaux's favourite flowers; you wish to have them in good order when he returns?"

"Weel, miss, I canna' just say that I had my maister in my mind enoo'; but I

ken fine that he likes thae braw bits o' flowers," was the reply.

"At any rate, when he comes back he is sure to find everything in the best of order, for I am sure the gardens are just as well kept as if he were here all the year round."

"'Deed, miss, we aye try to do our best, and I'm thankfu' to say that the maister hasna' muckle cause to complain—at least he doesna' complain," said Andrew, correcting himself with the characteristic caution of his countrymen, and adding, "Ye'll no ha'e heard when he's likely to be hame again, I'm thinking, miss, ha'e ye?"

Ida sighed as she answered the old man's rather roundabout question—

"Mr. De Vaux speaks very undecidedly about his return, and it is quite possible that it may be a year, or even more, before he comes back."

Here, thought Ida, as she passed on, is a man contented and happy, working hard all

day long at the pleasantest and healthiest of occupations, esteemed by his master, and respected by all who know him. How happy would she be to change places with him, and enjoy the calm sense of self-respect, which is the reward of duties performed conscientiously and in a right spirit. This man went home to his wife and children after the labour of the day was over, and his neat house was clean swept and ready to receive him, and neither care nor sorrow finds a place by his cheerful fireside. And she who would willingly live in a cottage, provided her peace of mind could be secured and the companionship of a congenial spirit be obtained, was obliged to take up her abode in the splendid halls of the very man who had caused her so much unhappiness.

During dinner but little conversation passed between Ida and her father, who noticed that she eat hardly anything, which he attributed to slight indisposition. He

did not ask her to sing or play, and indulged in an extra cigar in consequence. Soon after tea was over, Ida retired to her own room, and, throwing herself upon a sofa, gave way to bitter reflections. Each day now only seemed to add to her misery, and she almost wished that an existence, which promised so small a portion of earthly felicity, could be at once terminated. Glancing her eyes upwards they encountered a large coloured photograph of De Vaux, which hung over the mantelpiece—a gift from himself—and upon which she had often gazed long and fondly, after he had been feeding her hopes with sweet, delusive promises. His features seemed to wear a melancholy expression, and she fancied that his eyes cast upon her a glance of deep meaning, as if they asked for compassion and forgiveness. As she looked upon the picture, her better feelings again came to her relief, and she owned that it was not in her heart to wish any

evil to the man for whom she had suffered so much.

* * * *

Nearly three hours had passed, during which time Ida had lain upon the sofa in a sort of doze. The unnatural heat of the night made her feel drowsy and heavy, and the book she was trying to read had gradually slipped out of her hands. Aubrey's letter, too, lay beside her, for she had again been reading it over, and contrasting the light gay tone of one part with the solemn forebodings contained in the other. After a while, Ida moved restlessly and opened her eyes, which once more fell upon the picture of De Vaux. It seemed as though some mesmeric attaction led her to rivet her gaze upon those dark orbs, which looked down upon her in return with strange meaning. Taking up the letter, she was about to place it in her writing portfolio, when, for the first time, she noticed that the part privately addressed to her had been

written late at night, and was dated twelve o'clock. At the instant this struck her attention, the hall clock, which stood opposite the entrance door, began to announce, in deep, slow tones, the hour of midnight. Scarcely had the twelfth knell pealed through the silent passages and corridors, when on a sudden, Ida was startled by a loud crash, and saw that the portrait of De Vaux had that instant fallen, and now lay broken in pieces upon the floor. Ida was not very superstitious, but she was greatly struck with the remarkable coincidence, for the fall of the picture, occurring at the identical time at which De Vaux's mysterious letter was written, was an extraordinary circumstance. But although strongly imbued with romance and sentiment, Ida was a sensible and courageous woman, and she felt ashamed at the thrill of horror which, at first, passed through her bosom. What was more natural than that the nail which supported the portrait should suddenly give way? and

she laughed at the superstitious weakness which could interpret this as a bad omen. Still she could not shake off a singular feeling of uneasiness with which the incident inspired her, and did not care to analyse too closely all the curious train of ideas to which it gave rise. As she was now thoroughly aroused, and did not feel inclined to seek her couch, Ida once more settled herself to read, with the intention of invoking the drowsy god in this manner.

The air seemed loaded and heavy, and though Ida was robed in her snowy dressing-gown, still she felt hot and restless. Going to the window, she opened it, and looked out on to the lawns and park now shrouded with heavy shadows, and was a little refreshed by the faint air which entered the room. Hardly any stars were visible, and a thick gloom completely prevented any of the features of the landscape from being seen. The stillness was profound, and yet, if a person listened intently for a little time,

curious sounds could be heard. The motion of a bird in the boughs, or a rabbit running over some dry leaves, that would never be noticed in the day time, in the dead of night has a strange, hollow sound. Although no breeze stirred the heavy branches, or moved the plants all moistened with dew, still a sort of deep sighing noise seemed to arise, every now and then, from the dense woods, as if nature breathed heavily in her sleep.

Closing the window, after a while, Ida again lay down on the sofa, and tried to read. But she could not rivet her attention upon the volume before her, and insensibly her thoughts wandered to the singular incident of the broken picture. To any one who was a believer in omens, this circumstance would infallibly have indicated that something of a disastrous nature had happened, or was about to happen, to the original. The solemn hour of midnight at which the fall took place, just upon the last stroke of the deep-toned clock, and the sad

forebodings of the letter, all constituted a melodramatic concatenation of incidents. Restless and wakeful, Ida again got up and paced about the room, repeating the beautiful lines which De Vaux quoted in his letter. It was some time since she had seen the "Elegy," and she felt a sudden wish to read through the entire poem. She examined her book-shelves, but among the numerous volumes of poems, those of Gray were not there. There was a copy in the library, she knew, and in two or three minutes she could reach that apartment, and procure the volume. When once an idea struck Ida, she never rested till it was gratified, so slipping a mantle over her dressing-gown, and taking the candle in her hand, she opened her bedroom door and stepped into the corridor.

In a large, lonely country house, at the solemn period between midnight and the first hour of a new day, there is always something awe inspiring to those whose

nerves are not very strongly strung, in wandering alone through silent passages and staircases. More especially is this the case if there happen to be only two or three inmates at the time, for then the sense of loneliness and isolation is added to the other feelings of the moment. Each deep recess of window and doorway seems to loom with unnatural darkness, the sombre portraits on the wall frown gloomily upon the passer-by, the massive old cabinets may be imagined to harbour a robber or assassin within their panelled depths, and the vivid imagination pictures some tall, muffled figure, with shaded lantern and crape over his face, as ready to step forth from his hidden lurking-place.

But Ida despised such childish terrors, and walked hastily along the dark passages, which faintly echoed to her tread, until she came to the staircase which led to the library. Descending this, she reached the large square entrance hall, right opposite to

the place where the clock stood, whose tones had so startled her an hour before. This recalled the incident of the fallen picture to her mind, and a momentary thrill crossed her breast. Resolutely looking around, as if in defiance of any timorous promptings, Ida walked along the stone-paved hall and opened the library door, which was at the extreme corner, farthest from the porch.

Everything was in the room exactly as she had left it in the early part of the evening, only she was a little surprised to see that the window was still open. Although the neighbourhood was a quiet pastoral one, and few bad characters resided there, it seemed a little careless of the servants to leave a window, which could be so easily entered from below, quite open. However, as the night was so hot, she did not shut it, but merely closed the door gently behind her, and going to one of the book-shelves, took down the volume of which she was in quest. All Ida's motions had been of the

most noiseless kind, and her tread upon the soft Brussels carpet of the library could scarcely have been audible to one immediately outside the door. Seating herself at a table not far from the window, and right opposite to an old oak-panelled door in the wall, she placed the candle at a little distance from her book and commenced reading the "Elegy."

* * * *

It was about nine o'clock that same evening, when we saw that Milroy advanced as near to the house as he thought prudent, for the purpose of reconnoitring the premises. In a little while he withdrew under the shade of the trees, after particularly noting that the library window was still left open. Being provided with his cigar-case and a flask of good wine, he easily passed away the time until it was necessary for him to act. Concealed as he was, he could hear all the various sounds made by the inmates of the house and outbuildings as everything

was gradually closed for the night. The assistant-gardeners locked the greenhouses and garden doors, and went whistling to their homes. He heard the merry laughter of the dairy-maid as she responded to the witticism of some rustic admirer, and the lowing of the cattle from the distant fields fell distinctly upon his ear. Gradually all these sounds were hushed, and, one by one, the few lights in the mansion-house disappeared, as the windows were closed for the night. It was so pitchy dark that it was impossible for him to tell whether the library window was also shut, but he trusted that, at any rate, it would not be very closely fastened. Ida's room did not overlook the side of the grounds at which Milroy was concealed, otherwise if he had seen the light still burning in her window, it might have seriously interfered with his plans.

Milroy had upon his person a small dark lantern, a steel crowbar with a sharp point,

and a box of lights. He sat upon his folded cloak, under the shelter of some very thick laurel bushes, and it was perfectly impossible that he could be seen, even although a strong light should have been turned to the spot where he was placed. Every now and then he stood upright, so as to stretch his limbs, but was careful while doing so not to make any rustling in the bushes. Everything was going on well, when he was suddenly startled by hearing the heavy tread of some one walking across the plantation, apparently not many yards from where he crouched. What was worse, the person, whoever it might be, was evidently accompanied by a dog, for the animal's quick, sharp motions could be distinctly heard. If they came close to where he was, the dog would be sure to scent him and give the alarm, but to Milroy's great relief the night-watcher took another direction, and in a few minutes the sounds of his footsteps died away in the distance.

There was a clock in the stable-yard which tolled the hours, and it had just struck eleven as the keeper and his dog passed near Milroy's lurking-place. He resolved to wait until it was midnight before attempting anything, for, by that time, he judged everything would be still and the household buried in slumber. Meanwhile he was meditating upon the strange incident of his encountering Susan Helps, and the singular communication which she had made to him. He burned with impatience to get possession of the Bible of which she had spoken, and hoped that it had not been removed from its hiding-place. Could it be that the mysterious secret, which had long hung over him, was now about to be laid bare? It seemed an age before the old clock, for whose toll he waited so impatiently, struck the hour of midnight, but at last the welcome sound reached his ears. About half an hour after the last stroke died away on the heavy misty air, he slowly crept out from under

the bushes, and advanced with cautious steps to the gravelled pathway which formed the boundary of the plantation.

Ere he quitted the shelter of the woods, Milroy listened intently to satisfy himself that no one was stirring, and then stepped on to the closely-shaven turf of the pleasure-gardens, moving forward as quickly as the nature of the ground would permit. The impenetrable darkness, too, rendered great caution necessary, for he might stumble against a shrub or seat and spoil everything. However, by dint of exercising due circumspection, he arrived at that part of the grounds where the ornamental piece of water (it was hardly large enough to be called a lake) was situated. Even this he came upon rather suddenly, and all but precipitated himself into the water; but quickly skirting its banks, in a few minutes more he stood below the library window, which he then saw was wide open. A glance upwards showed him that it needed but one

active spring to enable him to stand upon the stone ledge of the window, and the next moment he made the effort and entered the library.

Milroy now paused for a little to survey his position, and, as he did so, his heart beat slightly at the thought that he was so near attaining possession of what was of such value to him. He peered out of the open window, and listened for any sounds that might indicate his motions had been watched. Not the slightest noise could be heard except, ever and anon, the faintest splash in the water or rustle amid the bushes. The air, though sultry, was as heavy as the atmosphere of a catacomb, and did not enter the open sash with sufficient force to fan his heated brow. Within the apartment all was still as the grave, and the dull ticking of the old hall-clock could not be heard through the closed door.

Before quitting his shelter in the bushes, Milroy had lighted his dark lantern, and

now he drew back the slide so as to let him see the door which he had to open. This door was of massive oak, handsomely carved, and was hardly ever opened, being considered, by any one who noticed it, as merely a false one, intended to relieve the uniformity of the panelling at that side of the room. Milroy now grasped the handle, and turning it in the socket, endeavoured to open the door, but it resisted his efforts. Stooping down, he brought the light to bear upon the keyhole, and saw that it was not locked, but probably was stiff from long disuse. Accordingly, taking hold of the handle with both hands, he drew it forcibly towards himself, and with a loud creaking sound the door swung open. Afraid lest the noise he made should have disturbed some of the inmates of the house, Milroy stood perfectly still to hear if any one stirred. All was as silent as before; the house might be tenanted only by the dead, from the impressive stillness which pervaded

it, and Milroy now entered the dark closet, closing the door very gently behind him.

When he stood within the small gloomy recess, Milroy allowed the full light of his lantern to play upon the wall before him, and presently noticed the panel, of which Susan Helps spoke, which had the dark spot at the top. At once pressing upon the knot, he felt it give way slightly, but the panel remained firm as before. Again essaying, he leant with one hand heavily upon the woodwork, while the other pressed firmly upon the spring, and presently the panel yielded, and disclosed a small square aperture beyond. Hastily thrusting in his hand, Milroy felt about, and at once touched what he knew to be a volume with brass clasps, which he drew from its hiding-place the next instant. Yes, there could be no doubt that this was the book of which he was in search, and a thrill of joy passed through his frame as he felt the coveted prize within his grasp.

Gently and noiselessly he now replaced the panel in its original position, and it closed with a slight snap, almost at the very moment that Ida opened the library door.

* * * *

Ida sat at the library-table reading, her head lightly resting upon one hand, as was her general attitude while so engaged, and the candle was placed at a little distance from her, casting a clear light upon that side of the room. The distance of the table from the open window was not above three yards, and the rays of the candle fell distinctly upon the carved oak door, which was in an oblique line from Ida's left hand. Just sufficient air entered from without to cause the light to flicker very gently, and to give a ghostly effect to the shadow of a bronze statue, which stood upon the table, as it played upon the dark panelling. All the rest of the apartment was pervaded with the deepest gloom, and a large full-length

portrait of De Vaux, which hung over the fireplace, could not be distinguished from the carved oakwork on either side.

Ida's attention wandered from the volume before her towards De Vaux, and the ominous words contained in the letter she had that morning received. Her eyes fell upon the wall before her, and she noticed the peculiar effect produced by the moving shadows upon the oak panel. Suddenly she remembered that there was a mysterious tradition connected with this very room, which in consequence was by many considered a haunted chamber. It was stated that the wife of a former lord of Delmaine Court—by name, too, Aubrey De Vaux—was sitting one night reading a letter from her husband, who was on foreign service in command of his regiment. His letter, though cheerful upon the whole, yet contained some expressions of a melancholy nature, and the lady laid it in her lap, and mused with downcast eyes on its contents.

All at once she seemed to feel a sudden chill pass over her frame, and lifted up her head to see if the window was open. A terrible sight met her gaze, for directly between the table at which she sat and the window stood a tall figure, ghastly pale, but the eyes sparkling with unnatural brightness, his features exactly resembling those of her husband. The spectre returned her horror-stricken gaze, and pressed its hand upon its left side, as though something pained it there, and the next instant the lady swooned away. That night she was seized with a dangerous illness, from which it was months ere she recovered, and in a few days afterwards intelligence arrived that her husband had been shot in the heart in action, on the very day on which the spectre had appeared to his wife.

It was not strange that this horrible circumstance should have occurred to Ida's memory just now, but even her strong nerves were shaken as she recalled the weird

tradition, and pictured to herself the dead man, with his fixed and terrible gaze riveted upon his trembling wife. She had not altered her position, but sat facing the window, with her forehead leaning upon one hand, and her eyes cast on the volume. Still a death-like silence reigned throughout the room, the candle burned with a clear, steady flame, the shadows ceased to tremble upon the wall. The next instant Ida heard a footfall upon the floor, and every pulse in her body seemed to cease to beat, each drop of blood in her veins to become chilled as ice. Mechanically she raised her head, and there—looking steadfastly upon her, his features calm as marble, his eye dark, but clear as ever, not a quiver upon his lips—stood Aubrey De Vaux, the man she knew to be thousands of miles away! Erect and seemingly transfixed he stood, while in one hand he held an old volume with two heavy brass clasps. Not a word nor a sigh did he utter, but watched Ida with steadfast im-

movable glance. She sat still, motionless as a statue, for every power in her body seemed struck with paralysis. The figure before her had none of the deathly hue of a corpse, although his features were of a marble pallor, and his eyes shone in the clear light of the wax candle with all the natural lustre of life. Sudden terror so bewildered Ida's senses that she was utterly incapable of making the slightest movement, or even of uttering the faintest sound, and her whole powers of action seemed concentrated in the awe-struck gaze with which she regarded the fearful apparition. Yet she did not lose all consciousness at once, and the idea even glanced across her brain that it might actually be De Vaux himself, suddenly returned without warning. For there he stood, or his double, surveying her with a look almost of compassion, certainly not of anger. His form was not shadowy, but clearly defined, and that one single footfall had certainly struck on her ears.

To her excited mind the figure seemed of unnatural size, as it loomed dark and upright against the polished panelling. All at once it appeared to grow more shadowy and indistinct; but the truth was, that Ida's consciousness was slowly beginning to give way. No woman's nerves could stand unmoved such an unearthly vision as she now felt this to be, and gentle nature came to her relief. Her gaze was as strongly concentrated as ever upon the cold marble face of her mysterious visitant, but a misty film seemed gradually to overspread her eyes; and now a stronger sense of dread overcame her, for the figure very slowly lifted one arm, which it extended towards Ida, who instinctively followed each motion it made. The arm was raised until it was on a level with the shoulder, and then the forefinger pointed steadily at De Vaux's portrait, which hung over the fireplace. This was the last act Ida could follow, as her powers of volition were fast ebbing

away; but, concentrating her strength in one final effort, she gave a piercing shriek, and fell in a death-like faint upon the floor.

An instant after, the figure was gone.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mary Forester was now in a much happier frame of mind since she had accepted Mr. Massey, for she resolutely steeled herself against recurring to any of the exciting love-passages which associated themselves with her recollection of Edward Milroy. Already these had begun to assume a shadowy outline; and each day the sterling honesty of purpose and unselfishness of disposition, which characterized her new lover, were brought more prominently into view. He lavished, too, the most delicate attentions upon Mary, all the more touching because they were unobtrusive, and in good taste. His was no vulgar, romping, schoolboy passion, that insists upon demonstrating

itself by violent protestations, and gives palpable evidence of its warmth by a totally unnecessary amount of hugging, fondling, and kissing. Mr. Massey's love, like his tenets, was of the most orthodox, calm, and clerical description. The curate never sat in the closest possible proximity to the beloved of his heart, toying rapturously with her certainly very white hand, making beautiful allusions to the delicate marbling of its velvet palm, and the rosy tint of its almond-shaped nails. Nor did he from this go on to expatiate upon the exceeding loveliness of each individual feature of his adored one's incomparable face, until every lineament was suffused with a delicate carnation tint. All this may be excusable in very young persons of a high-flown and poetical turn of mind, and who, consequently, are privileged to make themselves supremely ridiculous in every one's eyes but their own.

Mr. Massey's love was that of a pure

mind, untainted by any worldly passion or base motive. He felt that his happiness and power of doing good in this world would be greatly increased by the companionship of one who would understand and sympathize with him; and such an one he believed he had found in Mary Forester. Although she was not rich or highly connected, her simple graces of manner, and quiet unassuming charms of conversation, constituted a far more solid and lasting wealth in his eyes. The love which she avowed having felt for Milroy had no effect in diminishing the depth of Mr. Massey's affection. He was no believer in the Byronical doctrine, of one scathing, consuming passion, which desolates the heart, and plants an icy chill where the warm impulses of the disposition should nestle. Such natures exist only in the unhealthy imaginations of very young poets, or may possibly be encountered in the vale of Cashmere, or the citron groves of Andalusia.

In cold, misty, prosaic, and heavily-taxed England, they have no place, and their devastating effects happily exist only in the realms of poetry and blank verse.

The times which Mr. Massey now generally selected for his visits were in the evening, for then his day's work was over, and it was delightful to look forward each morning to seeing Mary, and hearing her sweet voice at night. Very often he came in as they were about to sit down to tea, and frequently he had some little offering of fruit, flowers, a new book, or the latest periodical, to win a smile from Mary's lips. Not that these delicate attentions were sought for by her, because she disliked being the cause of her lover's spending more than his rather slender means could afford, and needed no such material tokens to convince her of the sincerity of his passion. But he always assured her that they cost him nothing, or only the merest trifle, and looked so delighted when she

smiled her thanks, that Mary was obliged to let him have his own way.

Mary's excellent and managing aunt invariably left the two to their *tête-à-tête* after tea was over, for she had the good sense to know that the presence of a third party is a terrible restraint upon a pair of lovers longing to communicate those secret thoughts which can only be appreciated and understood by each other.

This evening Mr. Massey, as was his wont, arrived in time for tea, and, in due time, the affianced pair were left alone. Mary seemed to be somewhat more pensive than usual; and Mr. Massey exerted himself to dispel the air of sadness which hung over her.

"How pleasant it will be," he observed, "when we have to select the furniture of our new house. I have always had a wish to exercise my taste in this particular; and then, don't you see, you will be beside me to check any vagaries of fancy. You know

I have a few hundreds in bank uninvested, specially for this purpose; and I am sure we shall be able to make a capital show with the money."

"I am just afraid that you would be inclined to be a little extravagant in carpets and curtains," replied Mary, smiling; "for I have always understood my aunt to say that these required some judgment to select properly. Don't imagine that I should be much help to you, though, for my experience of house-furnishing has been very limited."

"Well, I daresay we shall get quite knowing in time," said the curate; "and everything must have a beginning. But Mary, dear, when will you be able to fix a day for the great event?"

Mary could scarcely repress a sigh as she replied—

"Come, Wilfred, you must not be too impatient, and take me away from this pretty cottage in such a hurry. Re-

member, I have hardly been beyond the garden as yet; and you would not like to have to take your country walks alone."

"Why, Mary, you look stronger and better every day; and when two people have made up their minds to be one, the sooner their wishes are carried out the better. I am sure, dearest, you can understand my impatience to have you all to myself. But stay," said the curate, with the faintest trace of jealousy haunting his mind; "it may be that you have not quite got over that former love for—for the man Milroy?"

"Indeed you wrong me there, Wilfred, because my conscience acquits me of any foolish dwelling upon the memory of what is, I trust, gone and buried for ever. Perhaps it may have been more an act of duty than inclination," she added, with an innocent amount of candour and *naïveté* which had anything but a soothing effect

upon Mr. Massey, whose countenance plainly showed the feelings under which he laboured.

"Well, Mary, you surely know that I never intended to hurt your feelings, but when you talk of loving me only as an act of duty, you must excuse——"

Mr. Massey was not allowed to finish his sentence, for Mary in an instant saw how keenly, though unintentionally, the expression which she let slip must have wounded the sensitive feelings of her lover, so she employed an irresistible anodyne to soothe his bruised sensibilities. Throwing her arms round his neck, she laid her face upon the curate's shoulder and whispered softly in his ear.

"My own Wilfred! you must not be angry, for I meant what I said in quite a different sense from the way you understood it. Now, come, kiss me, and say that you forgive your little Mary!"

The most practised coquette could not

have made an appeal in more endearing terms than the exquisitely winning tones in which these words were uttered; and Mr. Massey experienced an ecstatic thrill of delight, second only to that which moved him when he felt the gentle pressure which first told him that his love was returned. It was worth while to undergo a considerable amount of mental torture to have such delicious balm administered to his hurt feelings; and the innocent salute which the curate imprinted upon Mary's lips seemed to afford him supreme pleasure.

"There, now—that will do!" said Mary, as he appeared almost disposed to indulge in a second taste of this forbidden sweet, which, indeed, is an appetite rather apt to "grow by what it feeds on." "Now, Wilfred, you must be very good and well-behaved, and sit down and tell me what you have been doing for the last three days, because I was wondering how it was that we had not seen you."

"Ah! I thought you would not understand what had become of me," answered Massey, who had indeed been slightly disappointed that his absence seemed to be taken no notice of—so sensitive are a lover's feelings, at least in the early stages of his courtship.

"You may well say that," observed Mary, with an arch glance, "when you so often tell me that you cannot exist without seeing my face at least once in the twenty-four hours."

"Yes; but, sweetest! you forget that I bear about me a precious talisman, by means of which I can recal these dear features at once to my gaze," said Mr. Massey, smiling, as he pointed to a gold locket suspended from his watch-chain, which contained a likeness of Mary.

"Come, sir, I will have no evasions: tell the truth at once. Where have you been?"

"Well, then, Mary, you shall know all,

and I trust that my explanations will prove satisfactory. I have two evenings to account for that I was obliged to forego the delight of hearing your dear voice, because you know my whole day is so taken up that I never can call till tea-time. The night before last, just as I was setting out to come here, who should drop in but an old schoolfellow, whom I had not seen for several years. He has not been long settled in a curacy about five miles from this village, and had walked over on purpose to see me, so I could not go away at once and leave him, and we had tea together."

"Of course, you were quite right to keep him," interrupted Mary; "I should have been very angry if you had not. An old schoolfellow, too!—you must have had ever so many things to talk about."

"That was it, dearest! We got upon old, happy, schoolboy recollections, and each wanted to know what had become of all our mutual friends. You cannot tell what an

inexhaustible subject is the memory of one's school-days, and how you delight to recal each trivial incident that, at the time, passed unheeded. Our old masters, too—of course, every one had his peculiarities and characteristics, and all these were gone over one by one. Ah! what happy, innocent days were those; and how well I remember the old school with its large bay-trees in front, quaint red tiled roof, and the delightful grassy slope at the back, where we boys used to loll away our leisure half-hours on the pleasant summer afternoons," said the curate, throwing his head back in a musing attitude.

This is always the way with almost all men; they cling to the recollections of those early days, before they had become tainted with the vices manhood too soon acquires, and felt the corroding cares which wait upon a worldly career. What may at the time have been considered irksome duties, and even painful details, became softened and

hallowed in the dim haze of memory, and we would fain experience the innocent throb of pleasure now, which was so easily felt when the mind was full of simple impulses, and the heart uncorrupted by affected cynicism or bitter worldly knowledge. In the dry desert which life too often is, the weary traveller fondly recals that green spot, where the fast fleeting hours of youth's balmy freshness glided smoothly away.

"And no doubt you and your friend talked on, and talked on, till it was so late that he could not return home; and only fancy how frightened his friends or his landlady must have been at his never coming back," observed Mary.

"Stop, Mary!—not quite so fast. Herbert is a tremendous fellow for walking, and would not hear of remaining with me all night, so he set off about half-past ten to do his five miles, and, I haven't a doubt, got back before midnight."

"Well, that accounts satisfactorily for

one evening," said Mary; "and now, where were you last night?"

"Yesterday afternoon I set off to pay a visit, which I had been owing for some time, to Mr. Southwell's. They have always been extremely kind to me; and at one time I was a great deal about their house," said the curate.

"I understand," said Mary, smiling; "there are some Miss Southwells, are there not?"

"Yes—two. You must often have seen them at church; they sit about four pews from the reading-desk: showy, good-looking girls, with dark hair and eyes."

"Oh, yes, I know who you mean; and I suppose they are not only handsome but very agreeable. It is a wonder that you never fell in love with one of them. Are you quite sure that you did not?"

"Now, Mary, it is too bad to throw out such insinuations. No, it was their father who used rather to have a fancy for me, be-

cause he had been an enthusiastic cricketer and rower in his day, and when I was at Oxford I was tolerably proficient in these sports. So, you see, as I had not been to the Hall for some time, he insisted upon my remaining to dinner, and would take no denial."

"And did the Miss Southwells not add their request to that of their father, that you would stay? and confess honestly which had most weight with you?" said Mary, with an arch look.

"Common politeness made it impossible for me to refuse an invitation so kindly given, but what I sacrificed you best know. However, we had a very pleasant dinner, and I must say, they are always most attentive to their guests."

"Who are? the girls, or their father and mother," inquired Mary.

"Oh, the whole of them. They are rich, you see, and have such a well appointed household. The dinner was cooked to a mar-

vellous degree of perfection, and the squire's wines are considered superb, nothing like them in this part of the country."

"And what did you all talk about? Did you and Mr. Southwell get upon your cricketing and boating experiences, or were you too busy with the young ladies and their amusements? After dinner, in the drawing-room, which of them did you talk to?—you must tell me all you said."

"Stop, stop, Mary, I cannot follow all your questions,—one at a time, if you please," said Mr. Massey, laughing at Mary's impatience. "Mr. Southwell and I certainly did get upon the subject of athletic sports, and the young ladies had various matters interesting to girls of their age to talk about; so that, you see, there is another evening satisfactorily accounted for."

"Had the Miss Southwells heard anything about your coming so often to see me?" inquired Mary; "because my aunt

said she has been spoken to by several of her friends in the village about it."

"No, they have not, apparently. The fact is, I have not yet announced our engagement to any one, because I did not know whether you wished this done at present. What shall I do, dearest—do you think it best to give it out formally to my friends at once?"

"As I said before," answered Mary, with a modest, downcast look, "we must not be in too great a hurry; but it is disagreeable to have the ill-natured village gossips talking about you being seen so often on the road to our cottage."

"Perhaps they are charitable enough to put it down only to the score of my being attentive to you, in an ordinary, clerical sense, during your illness. At any rate they will very soon know the truth, and then all their ill-natured remarks will be silenced. Don't you think I had better speak to Doctor Farebrother about you? I know him pretty well,

and I can tell him that we are engaged to be married."

"Yes, Wilfred, I believe that will be the best plan, because I am sure he takes an interest in me, and will tell you exactly what he thinks. I wonder this never occurred to us before."

And so the lovers talked on, till it grew quite dark, about which time Mary's aunt generally made her appearance, after allowing ample time for the enamoured pair to have their undisturbed *tête-à-tête*. Mr. Massey, as usual, only remained a few minutes longer, and then took his leave, informing Mary that he should seek an early opportunity of seeing Doctor Farebrother.

CHAPTER XV.

When Ida von Borgern awoke to consciousness after the singular apparition which she had seen in the library, she found herself lying on her own bed with her father and two of the servants anxiously watching her. They had been roused from their slumbers by the piercing scream which had escaped her lips, when she saw the ghostly figure slowly raise its hand. Rushing, as soon as possible, to the quarter of the house from whence the shriek proceeded, when they entered the library, the first object which met their eyes was Ida stretched insensible on the floor. Next they noticed the open window, and, at once, conjectured that some one must have gained an entrance

by this way, and thus been the cause of Ida's alarm. The Baron closely examined his daughter to see if she had been injured by the supposed burglars, for he feared lest they might have stunned her, in their anxiety to escape identification. No marks of violent treatment, however, could be seen; and their next care was to carry her gently up to her own room. Then the Baron gave orders to rouse some of the men about the place, in case any of the burglars might be lurking about the house or gardens, and the library and adjacent rooms were examined to see if anything had been plundered. Everything, however, was found in the same order as it had been left when the house was closed for the night, and if robbery was intended, it was quite clear that none had been effected. No one could account for the open window on any other supposition, than that somebody must have raised it from the outside, and the grass below the window, and the stone ledge at its foot were

both examined, without any trace of foot-marks being discovered.

Meanwhile, Ida remained still unconscious, and continued so until her father procured some spirits of hartshorn, which he held to her nostrils, and, after a time, she gradually recovered. When she first opened her eyes Ida stared wildly about her with an excited and bewildered air, but grew calmer as she recognised her father and heard his voice. The Baron now dismissed the servants, directing Ida's maid to sleep in the bedroom next to that of his daughter, in case she might again be required during the night, and inquired what had caused the former so much alarm.

"Lie still, Ida, we are quite alone now, only Agnes is to remain all night in the next room, in case you want her. Do you feel yourself able to tell me what all this means; I fear, my child, that you have been in great danger?"

Ida had now in a great degree recovered

her senses, although she still felt a little confused. Her native resolution and strength of mind contributed towards this favourable result, and she answered her father in her own natural voice, with scarcely a trace of tremulousness in its tones.

"My dear father, you will, I am afraid, be inclined to laugh at me when I tell you that I have seen a ghost."

"A ghost!" said the Baron, smiling. "Well, I am glad it was no flesh and blood apparition, because I feared that robbers had got into the house and done you some injury. But you must be dreaming when you talk of ghosts, Ida; there were none ever seen about this house."

"Stop, you forget the story of the figure that appeared to Lady Anne De Vaux the night her husband was shot in battle."

"Yes, Ida, you are right, I had forgotten that tradition, but, after all, it was never very strongly authenticated. But where

was it that you saw this apparition, ghost, figure—call it what you will—which caused you to faint away?"

"Why in the library, at the identical spot where Lady Anne saw her dead husband's image."

"And who was it that appeared to you?" inquired the Baron, willing to humour his daughter's fancy, although he was convinced it was a mere hallucination of the brain.

"Now who do you think—guess?"

"No, really, Ida, you must excuse my attempting to pry into these spiritual mysteries," said the Baron, smiling; "but I am all impatience to hear who it was."

"Well, you shall—it was Aubrey De Vaux."

"De Vaux!" echoed the Baron, in a tone of surprise. "Do you know, Ida, that if he had not been so many thousand miles away, I should have thought it exceedingly likely to have been the man himself, *in pro-*

priâ persona. It would be exactly like one of his eccentric tricks, to present himself suddenly before you; and yet I don't know either; it would be too much of a school-boy piece of mischief to suit his proud, romantic nature."

"The extraordinary part of the story is, that just a second before the figure appeared I distinctly heard a footfall upon the library floor; I am perfectly positive about this; nothing will ever convince me that I did not."

"That is certainly strange; still it may have been a door creaking, or the window-blind; but first of all, tell me how came you in the library at that hour of the night?"

"Well, I happened to be reading rather late in my room, and I suddenly wished to see a particular passage in one of Gray's poems, so I went to the library to get the volume—but stop, I must first tell you of a very remarkable circumstance which occurred a short time before."

Ida here narrated to her father the whole incident connected with the fall of Aubrey's picture, to which the Baron listened attentively, observing that it certainly was an extraordinary coincidence.

"And what time do you suppose it was when you entered the library?" inquired the Baron.

"About a minute or two past one o'clock, as far as I can recollect," said Ida; "and, as I was not at all sleepy, I sat down at the table intending to read for a short time."

"Did you notice whether the window was open or not?"

"Yes, I did, and thought it careless of the servants not to close it; but the night is very sultry, and I read on although the window was open."

"That alters the complexion of your story, however, Ida, for it was very possible that some one may have entered by this means; but go on."

"As I said before, I was sitting quite still reading, when, all at once, I distinctly heard a footfall upon the floor. Instantly I looked up, and then saw the figure of a man, the exact image of Aubrey De Vaux, standing upright facing me. In one hand he held an old heavy-looking volume, with two brass, or gold, clasps on the boards, and he did not make the least movement but steadily returned my gaze. Of course I was horror-struck, and felt perfectly benumbed with sudden fear; but I did not scream all at once. His face did not resemble that of a dead person, but had a wonderfully life-like look, especially about the eyes. I do not know how long I sat looking at the apparition, but I seem to lose all recollection of everything after the figure raised its hand slowly and pointed to Aubrey's picture over the fire-place."

"Then it must just have been about this time that you gave the scream which awoke me," said the Baron; "for I glanced

at my watch and saw that it was nearly half past one. How was the figure dressed —did you notice this?"

"Yes, it had dark clothes on, just such as I have seen Aubrey wear; but I particularly noticed the clasped book which was in its hand."

"Do you ever remember having seen the volume before—was it newly-bound, and were the clasps bright and shining?"

"No; it was an old-looking book, just like a family Bible, that one might imagine contained notices of births and deaths for generations past, but I certainly did not recognise it as one of the books belonging to the library."

"What I consider the most remarkable part of the incident," said the Baron, "is, that you seem possessed with the idea that it was some living person, and from the description you give, he must be the exact image of De Vaux. I can understand that it is just possible, after you had been think-

ing a great deal about him in connexion with that mysterious letter, and his likeness being strongly impressed by force of circumstances on your brain—when the strange tradition about the ghost of his ancestor being seen on that very spot, and almost at that hour, occurred to you, I can easily imagine that your excited imagination could conjure up some shadowy form similar to what you saw. But who can this living prototype be, and what was his object in securing no more costly object than an old book?"

These words of her father's brought back forcibly to Ida's recollection the singular communication which she had heard from Mr. De Burgh at St. Petersburgh, and the idea was irresistibly impressed upon her mind that she was on the eve of some important discovery. She had shown Aubrey's gloomy letter to her father at the time she narrated the incident of the broken picture, and quite expected that he would again

recur to the relations that subsisted between the former and herself. The Baron, too, would have questioned her upon the subject; but he saw that, in the agitated state in which his daughter naturally was, it would be a most inopportune moment to select. Indeed it was very desirable that Ida should get some refreshing rest, for, although her excitement and terror were now almost entirely gone, she felt wearied from want of sleep. Therefore, after watching her for a short time, in accordance with a wish she expressed, the Baron was very glad to see Ida fall gradually under the influence of a deep and natural slumber. Shortly afterwards he left the room, and ere long silence once more reigned throughout the old mansion.

CHAPTER XVI.

Two or three days had passed since the mysterious incident happened to Ida which formed the subject of the conversation between herself and the Baron, recorded in our previous chapter. They frequently recurred to the subject again, but nothing had transpired since then to throw any light upon a circumstance of so remarkable and disquieting a nature. As was only natural, the Baron had questioned Ida about the state of her feelings towards De Vaux, for it seemed clear, from the tone of the latter's letter, that all was not yet ended between them. He was greatly surprised to find that Aubrey had been foolish enough to send a communication of a nature so calculated to

cause both misery and a dash of joy to Ida. In one breath he hinted that he loved her, and yet, the next instant, entreats her to forget him for ever. Indeed it was not the letter of a man in possession of his right senses, and the Baron began seriously to fear that the next news they should have would be that some catastrophe had taken place.

When the Baron spoke to his daughter about the relations subsisting between her and De Vaux, she answered in general, and rather evasive terms. Ida was resolved not to admit that she still cherished the sweet illusion in her bosom that she was loved by him. And yet his letter would almost point to the conclusion that no one had gained such influence and mastery over him as she had,—therefore it seemed within the limits of possibility that her wild dream of romance might one day be realized. The Baron now more than ever wished seriously that his daughter could be united to one

who would command her respect and affection, and he resolved that she should not again be brought within the sphere of De Vaux's disquieting influence until all danger was past. He believed that the thoughts of marrying and settling down in earnest were as far from Aubrey's mind as ever, and was quite prepared to hear that the latter did not intend to return to England for, possibly, years to come.

This being the case he was very glad when Ida received, one morning, an invitation from a friend and old school companion to pay her a visit at her father's country residence in one of the Western counties. Here would be an opportunity for his daughter mixing once more in the best society, and of distracting her mind from dwelling too much upon dangerous subjects. Besides, a change of scene was much needed by her just now, after the startling incident above-mentioned, and it was agreed that she should go in the beginning of the following

week. As some business arrangements prevented the Baron from escorting his daughter to her friend's house, it was arranged that she should proceed there alone. In fact, this was not a matter of any difficulty, for there was a railway the entire distance; and the day was accordingly fixed.

Ida, too, had a motive of her own for wishing to set off on this visit as soon as possible, and this was that she intended to take an opportunity of seeing the original of the picture which had caused her such uneasiness at St. Petersburgh, and which formed the connecting link between herself and De Burgh. She had carefully noted the address of the artist who took the photograph, and made certain that she would have little difficulty in tracing the original. The town in which he lived was not far from the residence of Sir John Marchfield, the father of her friend; and she was sanguine that, before very long, the mystery would be cleared up. Every day

she thought over the singular train of events which appeared to establish a connexion between herself and Mr. De Burgh; and the mysterious figure which appeared to her in the library seemed to bear strong testimony to the truth of his remarkable story.

Greatly astonished, therefore, was she when, the morning after she received Henrietta Marchfield's invitation, a letter in strange handwriting, yet the characters of which she appeared to recognise, was delivered to her, which proved to be from Mr. De Burgh. It was in the following terms:—

"My dear Miss Von Borgern,

"Probably you will be surprised to find from this letter that I have arrived in London, where I purpose remaining for a few days longer; but I made up my mind to quit St. Petersburgh some time ago. Since I saw you last I have

travelled a good deal, and visited many places of interest on the Continent where I had never been before. My present object in writing is to let you know that I am here, in case you may require anything which I can have the pleasure of doing for you.

"I have heard nothing of Mr. De Vaux since I left Russia; but, at that time, he was talking of travelling to all parts of the earth. He is a singular man, and the St. Petersburgh world were wonderfully puzzled what to make of him. However, I shall be the last to say a word in disparagement of his character, for he was always extremely civil to me.

"With kind regards to the Baron and yourself,

"I remain,

"Yours very sincerely,

"Eustace De Burgh."

This letter Ida read and re-read again,

because she could not exactly divine the writer's motive for wishing to communicate with her. At any rate, she resolved to take him at his word; and, in the first instance, made up her mind to ask him to accompany her to the residence of the girl, whose portrait in Aubrey's possession, had caused her such disquieting surmises. Her curiosity was excited to the utmost, and with her cleverness and tact, she would easily be able to frame an excuse for an interview with a total stranger. Accustomed to gratify the promptings of her somewhat imperious will, Ida allowed no considerations of conventional delicacy to stand in her way. She was resolved to find out if her suspicions were correct, and would not be swayed from her course by any trivial objections of this nature. It was, of course, of intense interest to her to ascertain if De Vaux had been playing false with one for whom he professed, over and over again, sentiments of the deepest love, and this opportunity

must not be neglected. Not a jot did it matter to Ida that her conduct might cause great anxiety and misery to her rival, because already she hated in her heart the innocent cause of all this bitterness of feeling. Should her surmises prove correct, she would then consider what to do to terminate for ever a connexion which had already cost her so dear; but the first thing was to make sure that she had justice on her side.

Acting upon this determination, Ida intended to write to Mr. De Burgh, thanking him for his letter and the offer of services which it contained, and asking him to meet her at some place convenient for both. But then she suddenly remembered that Mr. De Burgh was totally ignorant of the state of her feelings towards De Vaux, and her pride recoiled from the idea of his being allowed to harbour a suspicion that the former was beloved by her. And upon what other grounds could she put the

motive of taking such a remarkable step as to seek an interview with a girl to whom she was a total stranger? He would assuredly divine her reason—and thus this plan was at once given up. Besides, it really mattered very little whether she had him with her or not, because there could be no difficulty in finding out where this unknown rival lived.

Consequently Ida wrote an answer to Mr. De Burgh, expressing her pleasure at hearing from him again, and merely stating that if he was in this part of the country she would be glad if he called at Delmaine Court. She also mentioned that she was going to pay a visit to Sir John Marchfield, and finished by hoping that they might, before very long, renew their acquaintance. In truth, Ida was anxious not to lose sight of Mr. De Burgh, who, she believed, might one day be of assistance to her. For various reasons, too, she said nothing in her letter about the remarkable occurrence which

had recently happened to her, although she was convinced that, in any case, De Burgh would be intensely interested in hearing of it. At present she wished the circumstance kept secret from every one; and until she had seen her rival, it was useless to speculate upon what might take place. De Burgh she could, at any moment, summon to her aid; but in the meantime the cards must be played by her alone.

Ida accordingly, on the day appointed, set off on her journey to Sir John Marchfield's, but by an earlier train than the one previously arranged between her and his daughter. This was for the purpose of enabling her to visit the town indicated as the residence of the artist who took Mary Forester's picture, and she calculated the time carefully, so that there might be no mistake. The place where Sir John Marchfield's carriage had been fixed to meet her was at a small station some five miles from this town, and, as she had three hours to spare,

this allowed ample time for her purpose being carried out. When she reached the photographer's shop, Ida entered it as if for the purpose of making some purchases. She had been careful to dress herself very quietly, so as not to attract attention, being of course unattended; but in a small provincial town the circumstance of a young, handsome lady walking quite alone was a common enough occurrence. Having the number of the photograph of Mary Forester, Ida asked the shopman if the negative was still in their possession, because she wished a few copies. On examination it was ascertained that the plate existed, and, turning to a book, the shopman jotted down on a piece of paper the address opposite the number of the photograph, "Miss Forester, Beechwood Cottage, H——." This paper Ida casually glanced at, remarking at the same time, that being a friend of Miss Forester's she wished her portrait sent to an address which she furnished. While the

man was looking out some views of the scenery in the neighbourhood she purchased, Ida took out her card-case and carefully noted down Mary Forester's address upon the back of a card. She also ascertained that the village of H—— was not above twenty miles from Sir John Marchfield's house, and that there was a branch railroad to a small town within two miles of it. Having thus obtained all the information of which she was in quest, Ida left the shop and returned to the railway station in ample time to catch the train which would bring her to the rendezvous, where Henrietta Marchfield was to be in waiting with the carriage. Ida had previously left her luggage at this station, and explained to her friend, when they met, that she had gone on to the county town for the purpose of making a few purchases. For reasons of her own, too, she had not brought her maid as usual, and informed the Baron that she wished the girl to go home and see her

friends, and that Henrietta Marchfield's maid would do anything she needed.

Hitherto everything had happened as Ida wished, and, although she had much to think of, and the elasticity of her spirits seemed well-nigh gone for ever, still she assumed the mask of gaiety, striving, with success, to appear cheerful and happy. When she chose, no one could exercise more power to please over all who approached her than Ida, and she now exerted herself to the utmost. Henrietta and she had not met for some time, and the former was greatly struck with the rare beauty of countenance displayed in her old friend, for although Ida had for the last year of her existence, at any rate, passed a life of uneasiness and unhappiness, still her features seemed to grow more delicate and interesting every day.

CHAPTER XVII.

We have seen that Milroy succeeded in getting possession of the volume which contained something of such vital importance to his interests, and when Ida swooned away he instantly sprang out of the library window. Being only a few feet from the ground, he lighted gently upon the grass, and at once hurried across the intervening lawns till he reached the garden. Apparently he was well acquainted with the ground, for he threaded his way among the walks and terraces with perfect accuracy until he, once more, regained the shelter of the woods. Here he paused, and listened for the sounds of alarm which he certainly expected to hear. Ida's scream,

as we have seen, immediately brought her father and the servants to her assistance, and Milroy saw lights in the library and several other windows. Knowing that, probably, a search would be at once instituted, he hastened through the plantations until he came to a convenient place at which to emerge on to the park, and, in a short time, he again stood upon the high road at the outskirts of the demesne. He had carefully secreted the volume about his person, and now walked rapidly on to the village, some four miles off, where for the last few days he had been residing. On arriving at the inn where he put up, Milroy had some difficulty in rousing his somnolent landlord, who had agreed to sit up for him. He had given the excuse that he was going to dine with a friend a few miles off, to account for being so late, and mine host did not trouble himself even so much as to speak to his lodger when he returned. Placing a lighted candle before the latter, the village boniface locked

the door, and made haste to join his slumbering and tolerably well-favoured helpmate.

Milroy, as soon as he had gained his room and closed the door, drew forth the mysterious volume and laid it on the table before him. It was a family Bible, of old-fashioned appearance, and bound in dark brown, figured leather, with two very massive gold clasps a little dimmed from age. The volume was thickly covered over with dust, for it had evidently lain undisturbed in its hiding-place for years, and upon the face of one of the boards was the coat-of-arms of the De Vaux family in gold relievo. Deliberately and carefully Milroy unfastened the gold clasps, and between two of the leaves he found a thin packet folded in a covering of tissue paper, slightly faded and yellow, tied round with some green silk. This he left alone, for the present, and turning to the second blank leaf in the beginning of the volume, saw that it con-

tained a number of entries, in different handwritings, of births and deaths in the De Vaux family.

The last entry at the foot of the page was the one which riveted his attention; and, leaning his head upon one hand, he mused over the slightly faded handwriting for a long while. He was perfectly calm and composed, but it would seem that a sort of flush of triumph gleamed in his dark eyes, as he traced the characters which were of such deep import to him. At last he lifted up his head and heaved a sigh, almost as if relieved from some terrible misgivings, and taking up the little packet proceeded to unfasten the silk cord. A letter, written upon the first and second page of a piece of note paper, and a narrow slip of letter paper with three or four lines of handwriting and a signature upon it, apparently a certificate of some nature, were then disclosed to view. These papers also Milroy read over with the deepest interest, and finally leant back

in his chair in an attitude of intense thought. There was an air of determination in his aspect, and yet a shade of melancholy in the expression of his eyes, as if he had made a discovery which had given him some pain. His was a countenance which, at times, seemed to be lighted up with vehement excitement, and again to repose in almost chiselled calmness of aspect.

Still Milroy mused on, until the candle burning in its socket warned him to seek his couch, but sleep was long in visiting his eyelids. In the morning he carefully locked the portmanteau in which the volume was deposited, and, after breakfast, set out to walk to the cottage where he had seen Susan Helps. The day was bright and clear, no trace of the unnatural sultriness of the previous night being felt. As Milroy walked along the grass-grown sides of the road he leant, every now and then, over the fences, to enjoy the view of the finely undu-

lating country around. The morning sun had, as yet, scarcely dispelled the mist which lay in the hollows of the valleys and slowly floated away on the light breeze. Glistening with beads of dew, each tiny wildflower drooped its head, until the sunbeams kissed the shining drops away.

Although a casual observer would not have noticed it, Milroy invariably took the opposite side of the road if he saw any one approaching, and generally turned his head away as they passed one another. This had been his practice all along since he had been in the neighbourhood of Delmaine Court, but he was also very careful to choose most unfrequented paths when he went for a walk. Occasionally, too, he put on a pair of old-fashioned spectacles, which altered his appearance in a surprising manner; but this was only if he had occasion to pass within near view of any inmates of the cottages upon the estate. Round his neck,

too, he wore a large silk neckcloth, which concealed the lower part of his face; and his clothes were of old-fashioned cut, rather the worse for wear.

The rapid pace at which he walked, soon brought Milroy to the cottage of which he was in quest, and where he hoped to see Susan Helps. It wore the same desolate aspect as when last he was there, and there were as few signs of any inhabitants as before. In addition, the blinds were drawn down in the two windows to the front, and there was a solemn quiet all around which made him fear the worst. Knocking gently at the door, a hollow empty sound followed, but no reply came from within, and Milroy in a short time repeated his summons. Again the same hollow sound, and still nothing stirred. He now noticed that no smoke curled upwards from the chimney, and was upon the point of turning away, as he concluded that Susan was asleep, and the other woman must have quitted the

cottage. However, a thought struck him that he might make sure no one was within, and taking up a stone, he broke in one of the diamond-shaped panes of glass in the window, thus being enabled to insert his hand and push the blind on one side, so as to inspect the interior of the cottage.

The room had a tenant, for, stretched out upon the truckle bedstead, was the corpse of Susan Helps!

She lay with her face turned towards that of him who gazed in at the window, and a penny was placed upon each of her sunken eyes. He was too late, and the secrets which might have been divulged, were now locked in that cold bosom for ever. Well was it that he had seen her when he did, for she was then almost passing the threshold of the tomb; and had he delayed a few hours more, the strange tale, told by that volume with the dim gold clasps, would never have been brought to light.

Milroy slowly withdrew from the cottage of the dead, and looked around, but saw no one from whom he could gather any particulars as to the last hours of Susan Helps. He felt for the poor sufferer, breathing her last alone and almost uncared-for, with no kind relative to smooth her pillow, or mingle the sweet accents of prayer with those of the dying woman. Once two tiny prattlers had clambered into her lap, and twined their little arms round her neck; but that was long ago, and their endearing caresses were but a dim shadow of memory! A true and loving heart lay dead within that ice-cold bosom; and yet, of all those who had once owned the sway of its kindly influence, not one was near to moisten its tomb with a tear!

* * * *

As he walked back to the village, Milroy rapidly revolved in his mind how to carry out a new plan which he had formed, and

which he intended to put into action that very day. He was a man who was accustomed to act promptly, whenever he decided upon any course, and upon the present occasion it was important that no time should be lost. Accordingly, when he got to the inn he informed the landlord that it was his intention to make an excursion for a few days, but that he should leave his portmanteau, and get it when he returned. Then putting a few necessaries into a small travelling bag, in addition to which he also took the precious volume, packing it carefully away, Milroy set off again. There was a station on the railway, little more than three miles off, and when he arrived there he took out a ticket for a town called Bainbridge. This place was about two miles from the village of H——, where Milroy had once passed a few well-remembered weeks, on the occasion of his first meeting Mary Forester. He had not been

there since that eventful period of his life, and it was with strange and exciting emotions that he now felt himself rapidly nearing the scene of so much happiness and sorrow.

There were several passengers in the carriage with him, and Milroy, who had purchased the *Times* with the intention of distracting his thoughts from a painful subject by reading, found more amusement in scanning the features of his fellow-travellers, and watching some byplay which he could not help noticing. Seated next him was a gentleman of somewhat youthful, and not particularly intellectual, appearance, whose attention was completely engrossed by a very pretty, coquettish-looking girl sitting opposite to him. She held in her hand a railway novel, with a peculiarly brilliant yellow binding, on which was depicted a terrific struggle between a dragoon on a prancing horse, armed *cap-à-pie*, and three ferocious assailants on foot; but it was evi-

dent that her attention was by no means exclusively occupied even by the absorbing interest of the volume before her, for every now and then she rewarded the very apparent homage of her youthful admirer by an encouraging glance of her dark eyes. Still she did not exclude Milroy from the circle of her observation, but occasionally favoured him with a side look, which seemed to be a considerable source of annoyance to her opposite companion. However, she rested her head so becomingly against the cushions, and bestowed such a very liberal share of her glances and smiles upon her *vis-à-vis*, that she assuaged his rising wrath; and Milroy, a good deal amused, turned his head and looked out of the opposite window. At this corner of the carriage was seated an elderly gentleman, of dignified, aristocratic bearing, who was evidently the father of the young lady, and he was busy reading the "Quarterly Review," consequently paid no

attention to the others. It looked as though the young gentleman, whose attention was so occupied with the coquettish charmer with the blue gauze bonnet, was her affianced lover, because no blood relation could possibly achieve such desperately enamoured glances as he favoured her with, and the father once called him by his Christian name.

Milroy was amused with the byplay which was going on between the young lady and her juvenile admirer, and this sufficed to divert his thoughts from recent events. Presently he came to the junction at which he turned off for the village of H——, and had to change his carriage. A short time before this, the elderly gentleman got his dressing-case, and placed it on the seat before him, and Milroy noticed the name, upon a small card attached to the handle, "Sir John Marchfield." As he left the carriage the young lady again gave him a glance, which did not escape the vigilance

of her opposite companion. Shortly after this the train arrived at the station which was within two miles of H——, and Milroy at once got out and walked rapidly towards the village.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was with mingled feelings of pleasure and sorrow that Milroy found himself approaching the scene of such varied experiences. As he traced each well-remembered feature in the landscape, the memory of the confiding girl, who had ventured her whole happiness in his arms, recurred to his mind with irresistible force. Where was she now, and how had she received the blow which must have fallen upon her with crushing weight? He ground his teeth together, and would fain have stilled these disquieting recollections, but in vain. Often and often had he bitterly reproached himself for the folly and heartlessness of his conduct, but it was now too late, and he dreaded to inquire

what was become of the girl he had loved and then abandoned.

Dr. Farebrother lived in a large house, surrounded by tolerably extensive pleasure-grounds, at some little distance from the village. He was a well-known practitioner in that neighbourhood, both for general pathological cases, and had at one time made mental diseases an object of considerable study and research. He was a man of varied acquirements, and, from his easy and agreeable manners and cultivated mind, was a favourite with all who knew him. Middle-aged, of gentlemanly appearance, being in possession of ample means and a handsome house, he was looked upon as a very eligible subject for matrimonial purposes. Still the doctor did not show any great anxiety to change his pleasant bachelor life for the uncertain sweets of the wedded condition; but he always paid profound homage to his numerous friends of the opposite sex. His features were prepossessing, and his lofty

forehead was set off by dark hair, very faintly sprinkled with grey, while there was a degree of intellectual pallor in his countenance which gave a thoughtful aspect to the man.

Milroy made the doctor's acquaintance when he resided in the village, and the latter was, as we have seen, aware of his attachment to Mary Forester. Since the letter he had received from the doctor informing him of the dangerous condition in which Mary lay, Milroy had heard nothing regarding her. In consequence he felt the deepest misgivings as to what might have befallen her, and his present object in revisiting H—— was to see Doctor Farebrother, and inquire how she was going on. He knew well that the doctor strongly disapproved of his conduct in the matter, but it was imperative that he should learn in what condition Mary was, and, in addition, there was another subject of deep importance to himself, upon which he wished to con-

sult the acute and clear-sighted medical man.

Upon arriving at Doctor Farebrother's residence, Milroy ascertained that the former was not then at home, but was shortly expected to return. He requested to be shown into a room, as he preferred to wait, and accordingly was ushered into the dining-room—a large and lofty apartment, with windows down to the floor, through which access to the garden could be obtained. This room was furnished in a manner that indicated the thorough good taste of the owner, whose judgment, in matters of this sort, was considered perfect. The walls were papered with dark green and gold hangings, and a few oil paintings by modern artists had been selected with the greatest care and the eye of a connoisseur. A very handsome carved oak sideboard occupied one end of the room, and some fine bronzes were displayed upon it and the massive black marble mantel-piece. The rest of the

furniture of the room was of oak, and the prospect from the window was a well laid out garden, with shrubberies and woods beyond.

Milroy had not to wait very long before the doctor returned, and upon learning that some one wished to see him, the latter entered the dining-room. When he saw Milroy, who was standing with his back to the window, Doctor Farebrother bowed somewhat stiffly, at the same time accepting his visitor's proffered hand.

"I daresay you are surprised to see me, Doctor Farebrother," said Milroy, by no means reassured by the other's constrained and cold manner; "but I have been meditating this visit for some time."

"No, I am not, Mr. Milroy; in the first place because I do not allow myself to be surprised at an incident of so trivial a nature, and in the second place because I expected you."

"I own, doctor, that I ought to have called upon you long since, but I have been

in many and distant places since last we met, and it has scarcely been in my power to wait upon you before. I know that your time is precious, therefore I do not wish to detain you, but will just simply ask you how Mary Forester is," said Milroy, rather chilled by the doctor's calmness.

"Mr. Milroy, there is no need for hurrying yourself. I do not mean to go out again till the afternoon, and what you have to say to me is certainly of greater consequence than my gardener's report on the state of the vines, the coachman's upon the horses, or other domestic details to which I should probably have to listen. I am quite at your service," said the doctor, with freezing politeness.

"As I said before," replied Milroy, who rarely lost his self-possession, but was a good deal taken aback by the tone of his companion, although he knew he had given him some ground of offence, "I should like to know how Miss Forester keeps, as I

believe you used to pay her professional visits."

"Miss Forester is still alive, and even looks tolerably well, although I would not give four months' purchase for her life. Most assuredly she will be dead by this time next year," was the reply, in the doctor's clearest and most incisive tones, at the same time that he looked piercingly at his visitor.

"Good God! you don't say so, Doctor Farebrother!" exclaimed Milroy in an agitated voice. "Dead! dying! it is impossible! You alluded to this in your letter, but I could not believe it. Poor Mary! dear, sweet girl! Oh! do tell me that there is yet hope left."

"Mr. Milroy, I am neither in the habit of writing or speaking falsehoods; it is a matter of perfect indifference to me whether you do or do not believe what I state, but I think you might have sufficient politeness to conceal your disbelief."

"I really ask your pardon for my rudeness," said Milroy; "but this terrible announcement completely astounds me. Do I really understand you that she cannot live?"

"I regret that my language is not sufficiently explicit, but, if necessary, I will endeavour to explain my meaning. Mary Forester must die, and you alone are the cause of her death."

"Oh! Doctor Farebrother, do not use such harsh language," said Milroy, stung by the cutting tones and relentless manner of the other. "I loved the girl deeply and truly, but I take Heaven to witness that I only abandoned her to save her from a worse fate."

"If you mean to talk enigmas, Mr. Milroy, I must at once inform you that I don't wish to prolong the conversation. Anything in reason I will hear, but mere paradoxes I object to."

"I assure you it is no enigma or paradox,"

said Milroy, earnestly; "if I dared to tell you everything, you would acquit me of any crime more serious than that of thoughtlessness and mere youthful folly."

"Youthful folly!" exclaimed Doctor Farebrother, with more animation than he had yet shown; "have you no severer epithet to apply to your conduct? Consider for a moment what you did, and then go and ask for pardon from that awful tribunal before which you will one day have to answer. You came to live in this village, for what motive I know not; you made the acquaintance of one of the sweetest girls I ever met, and you never rested till you had completely gained possession of her affections. You saw the purity and beauty of her disposition, and, with the skill of a practised *roué*, you availed yourself of this innocence of purpose to bring your machinations to a successful result. By making honourable proposals of marriage you apparently vindicated the propriety of your intentions,

and the poor girl was deluded with the idea that her happiness was about to be insured by an union with the man she loved. Up to the last moment you keep up the delusion, and then, without one word of adieu, you leave the girl to her fate, and are never heard of more. I confess that my only wonder is, why you did not complete the crime by the consummation to which it seemed to point; but certainly you did enough. And now you seek to gloss over this damnable piece of wickedness by styling it a mere youthful folly!"

"Spare me, Doctor Farebrother, until you hear my defence," said Milroy, who quailed beneath the indignant denunciation of his conduct which he had just heard, and which, if he could have anticipated, would certainly have determined him not to seek out the man who seemed to constitute himself Mary's champion.

"Perhaps I may be too severe in my expressions, Mr. Milroy, before I have heard

by what means you propose to extenuate your conduct," said the doctor, recovering his habitual calmness of demeanour; "but if you vindicate yourself from my charges, I will cheerfully unsay all my words."

"When I sought you this day, Doctor Farebrother, I did so with the intention merely of inquiring how Mary Forester was, and, if possible, of repairing the grievous fault of which I have been guilty. I did not anticipate being put upon my trial, and consequently am not prepared to bring forward all the materials necessary to clear myself. Some day you shall know all: but, until then, I must just lie under the ban of your censure, believing that the time will come when you will do justice to my motives."

"Then I am to understand that you delay giving any explanations for the present?" said the doctor, quietly.

"Yes; much as I would like to clear

myself in your eyes, I must not precipitate matters by a premature disclosure of my secret. I should like, however, to ask you if your acuteness cannot guess at any solution of my seemingly inexplicable conduct?"

Doctor Farebrother looked keenly into his visitor's eyes, who bore the inspection without wincing, although there was a remarkable intensity in the practised medical man's gaze. He seemed to think deeply for a little, and then answered with the air of a man who could not make up his mind—

"I am not certain but that I have a faint idea of the secret which is to absolve you, but there is no need that it should be disclosed at present. Only, what do you mean to do with respect to Mary Forester?—are you going to see her and endeavour to atone for what you have done?"

"That is especially what I wished to

consult you about," said Milroy. "You say she is ill; will she be likely to admit me to her presence? Does she still live with her aunt at the cottage that I remember so well?"

"You will find her in the old place; but I must tell you that she has another admirer, and, this time, one of whose motives there can be no doubt."

"Pray, who is he?" inquired Milroy, with jealous interest.

"A gentleman of the highest honour and worth — Mr. Massey, the clergyman."

"Oh! I remember him very well; he was a great favourite with his parishioners. But, if Mary is so ill, how is it that she can be receiving the visits of a professed suitor for her hand?"

"Although I know how deeply seated is her disease, still outwardly she presents the appearance of tolerable health. And, as yet, her strength has not given way, so that

she moves about the house as usual, but she is obliged to keep indoors. Consequently, Mr. Massey is received there on the footing of an avowed admirer; but I believe that Mary has already informed him of her own surmises concerning the dangerous state of her health."

"Then she is aware herself that something is the matter, poor girl? Ah! what would I not give to be able to undo all the evil that I have unwittingly been guilty of!"

"Unwittingly, indeed!" said the doctor; "I must say, Mr. Milroy, I think you have made use of a very unfortunate expression there. However, it is now too late, I fear, to remedy the mischief; and we must not waste time in vain regrets."

These words Milroy interpreted as a hint that the doctor wished to close their interview, so he rose and prepared to leave.

"I should like to have your opinion," he

said, "before leaving, whether you think I ought to see Mary?"

"In my opinion, then," replied Doctor Farebrother, "you certainly had better keep away from her. She has forgotten you and found another, upon whose devotion she can depend, and therefore no possible good can come of your reopening the wound which time has healed up."

Milroy felt that the doctor's words were unpleasant truths; and that, as he had no definite proposal to make, and his place in Mary's affections having been filled by another, it would be better for them never to meet again. He had indeed thought of consulting the doctor upon another matter of deep importance to himself, but his reception had not been of a nature to encourage him to do so on this occasion. Therefore he took his departure after a few other conventional remarks, saying that, in all probability, he might soon again return to ask Doctor Farebrother's opinion upon a matter

which concerned them both. The latter courteously remarked that Mr. Milroy might, at any time, command the best advice he could offer;—and so they parted for the present.

CHAPTER XIX.

Ida's visit to Sir John Marchfield's was a very quiet one, as there was nobody staying in the house except herself and Mr. Vincent Mountjoy, a young gentleman of property, to whom Henrietta Marchfield was engaged to be married. He was a very heavy young man, with a capacity limited to a moderate knowledge of how to manage a horse, shoot partridges, and play croquet. With such accomplishments as these, it may be supposed he was not a particularly lively companion, and Ida wondered how her friend could have engaged herself to him; but Henrietta was an easy, good-tempered girl, by no means clever, and accepted the first man that asked her. Mr. Mountjoy was her own second cousin,

and they had been accustomed to one another since they were children, so the transition was a natural and imperceptible one, from playmates to lovers. She liked the idea of having servants and an establishment of her own, and had never formed romantic notions of passionate love, with its usual concomitants. Indeed there was a good deal of plain, common sense about her, which would amply make up for her affianced husband's want of it, and Ida could not help envying her quiet philosophical reasoning on the subject of marriage.

"You see, Ida," she said as they were conversing one evening in the drawing-room while the gentlemen were at their wine, "I am sure I shall be very happy. Vincent is not particularly bright, but he is not quite a fool, and we understand one another's ways thoroughly. He is very good-natured, and I shall have entirely my own way, so that there is no chance of our quarrelling. We shall be most comfortably off, because he has

at least three thousand a year, and as neither of us care particularly for gaiety and dissipation, we shall live the greater part of the year in the country. Now, tell me, don't you think I have a very fair prospect of happiness ?"

"Yes, you have indeed," said Ida; "if it is really the case that your ideas are so wonderfully circumscribed; but I used to think that you rather liked admiration, and were not averse to a little quiet flirtation."

"Well, I wont deny that I didn't mind getting attention from gentlemen at the balls I was at last season, but that was merely because, wherever I am, I like to enjoy myself, and therefore disliked to have to sit when I might dance. But when I am married, I am sure I shan't care a bit if we never go to balls, and, of course, I shall never flirt as Mrs. Mountjoy."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Ida, laughing; "you will have plenty of opportunities for it, and these good resolutions

may soon be forgotten. I think, if I had been you, I would have waited another season or two before settling down. I candidly tell you that Mr. Mountjoy is not the man I should have fancied, although I admit, he will very likely make a capital husband."

"I daresay that, Ida, for I remember you used to have very romantic ideas upon the subject of love. Now, don't *you* mean to marry some day? You must meet numbers of men of position sufficient for even your high standard of what is essential."

"No doubt I shall some day; that is, if any body will have me," said Ida; "but I suppose the proper person has not made his appearance yet. I am in no hurry, however, to anticipate my fate, but am quite content to take life as it comes, the rough with the smooth."

"Now, could you not make a brilliant hit and secure Mr. De Vaux himself? You live constantly with him, and must know all his

peculiarities, for I am sure, by all accounts, he has plenty of them.

"What nonsense you talk, Henrietta; the idea of my marrying Mr. De Vaux! Why, he would hardly think a princess good enough for him, and, besides, he is a man who will never marry."

"He must be a very extraordinary man indeed. How is it that he is so little at Delmaine Court? No one in this neighbourhood seems to know him at all, in fact, he scarcely ever comes here, and when he does, it is at a time that everybody is away."

"Well, you see, he has so many country residences that he can't visit all of them, for any length of time, and he prefers his place in Scotland for continuous living. He is rather fond of change, and is at present travelling in the East, so that it may be a year, or even more, before he is back. People talk of his eccentricities merely from hearsay, and because he is so very

rich, and consequently a marked man. All that I can say is that he is a person of commanding abilities, and master of almost every accomplishment, only that he does not choose to display them to the world, whose opinion he holds in contempt."

"What a pity this is, Ida; now, if he had been otherwise, look what a splendid position he might have occupied. In place of merely being pointed at as 'the enormously rich Mr. De Vaux,' he might have been 'the famous orator,' or 'the celebrated author.' Don't you agree with me?"

"Yes, I do, but all that you or I can say, my dear Henrietta, will never make Aubrey De Vaux change his ways; we must exercise our powers upon some more plastic materials."

"But I want to see you married, Ida. You, with all your good looks and cleverness, ought really to captivate some one worth winning. By-the-bye, we travelled part of the way in the train the other morning

with a gentleman, whose countenance I am sure would have taken your fancy, it was so full of talent and expression. I wonder who he could be."

"Indeed, what was he like?"

"His face was very pale and thoughtful, and his mouth was full of determination, but his eyes, above all, took my fancy, they were very dark and full, with an indescribable expression in them."

Ida's attention was awakened by this description, although it was vague enough, but still she was interested.

"Come, Henrietta, you must not let Mr. Mountjoy hear you dilate upon this gentleman's features, or he will be jealous; you really interest me, but did you not have any conversation with this captivating stranger?"

"No, but I could not help looking at him a good deal, much to Vincent's indignation, I assure you."

"Take care, Henrietta," said Ida, laughing; "if this is the way you go on in the

very face of your intended husband, what will you do behind his back?"

"Ah, but this was quite an exceptional case, only there was something in the expression of the gentleman's eyes that seemed to fascinate me. I should so like to know who he was, and tried to read the address on his travelling-bag, but I could not make it out."

"Very likely you may meet him again some day, and then you can find out. By the way, you have never seen Mr. De Vaux; I will show you his carte-de-visite," said Ida, taking up her album which lay on the table. Turning over the leaves, she came to a picture of De Vaux, in ordinary morning dress, which she handed to Miss Marchfield to inspect.

"What is the meaning of this, Ida?" said her friend, in a surprised tone. "Then it was Mr. De Vaux himself all the time, whose features I was admiring so much!"

"I don't understand you, Henrietta," replied Ida, as a strange thought flashed across her mind.

"Why, the very person we travelled with the other morning was Mr. De Vaux; you told me he was in the East."

Ida's face grew pale as marble as the incident in the library at once occurred to her recollection; but she felt it would not do to betray her agitation, so she replied calmly—

"Of course he is in the East, Henrietta, for papa and I had a letter from him only a week ago. It must have been some one with a singular likeness to him that you saw; indeed, there is nothing so very wonderful in this."

"Well, all I can say is, that it was the most extraordinary resemblance I ever saw. Every feature is exactly the same—eyes, mouth, and the whole expression of the face. Perhaps it was his brother."

"That could hardly be," said Ida, smiling,

" because he never had one. However, the next time you meet this captivating stranger, you must tell him what a wonderful likeness there is between him and Mr. De Vaux."

"I certainly never saw such a marvellous resemblance before. I can understand now what you say about Mr. De Vaux's attractions in the way of appearance and manners."

The entrance of the gentlemen now put an end to the conversation between Miss Marchfield and Ida, nor was it renewed that evening.

The latter was very glad when it was time to retire to her room, and, after Henrietta bid her good night, she had time to reflect upon the startling circumstance which her friend mentioned. Who was this mysterious stranger that bore such a resemblance to Aubrey De Vaux? Was it the same man who appeared to her in the library at Delmaine Court that night? If

it was, what did he want there at that hour? or was it within the limits of possibility that it could be De Vaux himself, after all?

The more Ida thought over the strange incident, the more convinced she was that it was a living figure she had seen, and not a mere hallucination of the brain. Again and again did the recollection of what Mr. De Burgh had told her recur to Ida, and it was most likely that he and Mary Forester could give some information about this man. On the presumption that it was De Vaux himself, she tried to think what motive he could possibly have for visiting the neighbourhood of Delmaine Court incognito. What did he want in the library at midnight, with that old book under his arm; and when he saw her, why did he not at once confess the trick he was playing? His conduct was utterly inexplicable, more especially after the ominous words contained in his letter; and Ida was forced

to come to the conclusion that it was not De Vaux. Then who was the person so strongly resembling him that De Burgh had met, for this clearly must have been the man that Henrietta Marchfield saw in the train.

What would she not give to meet him at an hour and place where they could talk to each other without fear?

What could be his object in gaining an entrance to the house? It was not plunder, for he had taken nothing away except that old book. Still, very possibly, Mary Forester would be able to explain it, because there seemed every probability that this was the man of whom Mr. De Burgh had spoken.

Ida had De Vaux's own assurance that he never loved any one except herself, and Mr. De Burgh himself had been informed by the former that he was completely mistaken in his surmises. In any case

she would very shortly know more about these mysterious incidents, because in a day or two she intended to see Mary Forester, let the consequences be what they might.

END OF VOL. II.

LONDON:
SAVILL AND EDWARDS, PRINTERS, CHANDOS STREET
COVENT GARDEN.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 051362900